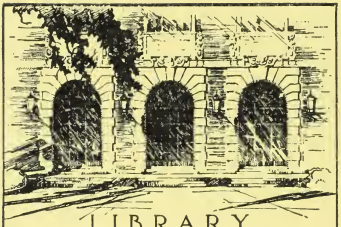
LIFE YET NOT LIFE

BY

W. WAKEFIELD



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A NOVEL.

BY

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"OUR LIFE AND TRAVELS IN INDIA," "THE HAPPY VALLEY,"

ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

NEWS FROM HOME.

A FINE cool evening at the commencement of the cold-weather season of 1868, and yet the Mall and the Bandstand, the glory and boast of the cantonment of Morar, a military station in India some seventy miles from Agra, was, save for the presence of a few children and their dusky attendants, entirely deserted.

A great contrast to the scene usually presented at this time and season, when the European residents of this rather arid spot in the Presidency of Bengal, awakening from the somewhat lethargic condition of both mind and body engendered by the moist heat of the rainy season following the grilling endured in the hot, were here wont to congregate, exchange gup or small talk, stare, flirt, and flatter and abuse each other; or, if in better

health and spirits than usual, make or talk over preparations for amusement either for that evening or the following day.

It was too late in the year for the leave season, so the general exodus of all who could to the hills could not account for it; neither was there any parade or inspection to detain its usual frequenters of the male sex on duty, or the fair for lack of their usual escort, and yet the fashionable, in fact the only universal meeting ground, was deserted.

How to explain this?

The English mail was in.

And only in time for distribution at the hour of pleasure, and the eager recipients of the contents of the bags were too busily engaged in their own bungalows, devouring the news from home, to think of aught beside; so the Mall, the usual resort of all and everyone, remained for the moment forsaken and forlorn.

It is only those whose vocation in life calls them to dwell far, far away from home, in one of our numerous colonies, who can perfectly realise the magic of those few simple words: The English mail's in?

What joy! what sorrow! was it bringing to some poor exile, voluntary if you will, but no less an exile from country, kith, and kin, than one whose follies or misdeeds in the land of his birth carries his own punishment in forced expatriation.

For to the mind of every true-born Briton, any place, no matter its charms, away out of his own country, are more or less places of banishment. And whether for pleasure, health, or profit, their

residence abroad is more or less prolonged or even permanent, their thoughts will ever wander across the wide oceans that divide them from their own beloved sea-girt isle; and the heart-felt prayer ever constant on their lips is, to be granted wealth, health, and strength, to enable them to revisit the cradle of their race, the scenes of their innocent childhood, and of their happy youth, their home, their own dear home, before they die.

If such thoughts are present in the minds of our fellow-countrymen, dwellers in those of our colonies, English and homelike now in everything but the name, what must they be to those whose lot in life has been cast in India, our great Empire in the East? Intensified and intensified to a great degree.

For in that sunny land they are aliens—aliens alike in manners, speech, and habits—from the countless hordes of the native inhabitants of the country, and amongst whom they dwell for a time, the ruling race, feared rather than loved; but, with very few exceptions, regarding merely their presence there as one only of necessity, a temporary evil, and which length of service, either civil or military, or commercial success in the case of others, will soon put straight, and their faces turned towards their native land, all the discomfort, the vexations, the griefs or troubles so long patiently endured, will be forgotten in the joy of the home-coming. The dwellers in Morar formed no exception to the general rule, and at the time our story opens were all busily engaged in reading the news from home.

To one at least in the community this particular post, evidently, had not brought pleasant news, for a mingled look of annoyance and disgust sat on the usually placid, if somewhat stern features of Colonel Ralph Carwithen, C.B., V.C., a tall, fine soldierly-looking man, in the prime of life, who, standing in the centre of a room opening on to the verandah of a commodious bungalow facing the Mall, seemed intent on the attempt to gain some clear knowledge of the contents of various sheets of blue paper, covered with the close and crabbed writing dear to lawyers, and rendered no easy task by the legal phraseology of every sentence.

And such appeared the case. For after a vain attempt, which only seemed to end in losing the information gained in the first few lines in the mazes of whereas, wherefore, and whereby, and other terms that followed, the reader flung the will, for such was the nature of the document he held, upon the floor, and sinking into the depths of a capacious cane chair, covered his face with his hands, and for several minutes remained motionless, in apparently deep thought.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet and commenced pacing up and down the room with hasty strides, and the look of anger on his face gave place to one of supreme disdain.

"Well," exclaimed he, "I suppose if these good people whom the world calls my friends, and who long since have voted me proud and heartless, were to know my present thoughts, they might consider they had just and reasonable grounds for their charitable opinion, for I confess I feel just the reverse of what a son ought to, I suppose, after having just received the news of the death of his father.

"But what a father!!

"To think that, after all these years, the dislike he showed of me from my very birth, and continued persistently through childhood, youth, and manhood, for no cause except that I was the offspring of one of those most miserable of beings—an unloved, neglected, and unhappy wife, should have been with him in his last moments, and even carried beyond the grave, by the power the law allowed him to rob me of what if not legally mine was morally so.

"It is enough to make the bones of my ancestors turn in their coffins, so proud as all have been of the name and possessions of the Carwithens, and of the family honour. And that has not suffered at my hands, if men speak truth; and yet the one who should have been the proudest of all at the successful career of his only son has hated him for it, and has ever been the silent enemy, with power even to wound and injure after death. For no greater wrong could he ever have inflicted than by robbing me of my birthright and all I hold most dear.

"For, if I understand aright, not a single acre, not a single family relic is to be mine.

"All, all to be sold, and the cherished possessions of an old and proud family for generations to pass into the hands of strangers, and their name to be forgotten in that part of England their home for centuries.

"And all done out of sheer wickedness, to show, I suppose, his contempt for his own and his forefathers' memory, and to spite the son because he hated the mother.

"He must have been insane, or rather utterly mad;

and yet the letters of both Ledgett and my dear old nurse appear to prove the contrary, and it may be so according to general opinion and to present law.

"Though, the terms sane 'and insane' seem to me to be used in the same relation to mental condition as health 'and disease' are to the bodily condition.

"A man need not, I suppose, have some malignant disorder to be out of health or 'suffering from disease,' neither, I presume, need a man be a helpless idiot or a raging maniac to be pronounced as 'suffering from insanity.'

"My wretched father must so have suffered, for it is hard to think that such wickedness could ever exist in the mind of a perfectly sane person; but to prove it to the satisfaction of the world, that is another matter.

"What says my friend the lawyer on that subject?" continued the Colonel, taking up a letter from off the table. "I will read it carefully through again, and I may see some ray of light; but I doubt it, as my hasty perusal only showed me how dark are my prospects under that iniquitous will.

"I must be quick, though, as I have to be at mess, to meet the General at the race dinner to-night, and also to look in at the lottery—look queer if the principal member of the committee was absent. I suppose, though, I ought not to show myself after such news, so as to appear in grief at the loss of a parent. But no such humbug for me. That wretched man, no doubt, was the author of my being, and there it ended.

"He never was a father in the true sense of the word, and I cannot, nor will not show any concern at his death; and if anyone makes any remark, as I don't feel particularly amiable to-night, I will let him have it strong, and so stop any of the others, who, no doubt, would be anxious to pass their opinion on my unnatural behaviour.

"Now for the letter."

CHAPTER II.

THE LAWYER'S LETTER.

"SOUTHERNAY, EXETER,
September 20th, 1868.

"DEAR SIR,—I have the painful duty to inform you of the death of your father, General Hubert Carwithen, C.B., which event occurred on the 14th inst., at 4 A.M., and that the funeral of the same was duly solemnised yesterday, at 11 A.M., the place of interment being the family vault in the Abbey Church of Tavistock.

"This communication will not, I imagine, be unexpected by yourself, as in my last letter, dated June 5th, and which you duly acknowledged, I acquainted you with his serious illness, and that the doctors in attendance entertained no hopes of his recovery.

"I cannot, in all sincerity, condole with you at the loss of a parent as one ought to, I suppose, knowing as I do all your family history; but believe me, my dear Colonel, that I most sincerely do so in regard to the manner in which your late father has acted in the disposition of his property, and which, with deep regret, I now inform you.

"Agreeably to the instructions you honoured me with some little time ago, in anticipation of such an event, I presented myself at the house, the day after the General's decease, as your representative, and, as I also imagined, in the character of the family lawyer, to look after your interests as next-of-kin, well remembering your father's repeated assertion, couched in the strongest of language, that nothing should ever induce him to sign a will, or, as he termed it, a death-warrant.

"Judge of my astonishment at being confronted by a perfect stranger, who informed me he was Mr Stimson of London, solicitor to the executors and trustees of the estate, under the last will and testament of the deceased.

"I confess I was staggered for the moment, but recovering my breath by an effort, I asked the names of these gentlemen.

"He replied, Mr Charles Haverty and Mr Thomas Linwood, both of Exeter.

"I knew them well by name. The one a retired merchant, with a reputation for business talent of a high degree; the other the manager of a large brewery, and much esteemed by all who know him.

"Both most honourable men, who would strictly carry out any duty they were called upon to perform, however much they might sympathise with you in the demand now made upon them. I asked to see the will, which was at once produced, with the remark that it had been drawn up by Messrs Pateman & Son, a well-known firm in London, and that it had been duly signed and attested, pointing to the well-known signature of the General as he spoke.

"He agreed to my demand on your part for

a copy of the document, most willingly and politely offered his services if at any time I should need them, and after a few minutes of ordinary conversation I took my leave, at the same time cordially thanking my new friend for his kindness and attention.

"The copy of the will, as promised, duly came to hand, and I forward it to you, with a request to return it at your earliest convenience; and at the same time I will give you a brief outline of its contents, which has surprised and grieved me beyond measure, so wrong and unjust are its conditions. I feel sure, also, that the testator was aware he was acting wrongly, for why not have come to me, the friend and lawyer to the family all my life, as my father was before me, and not have gone to a total stranger, who had no interest in the matter further than to earn his fees.

"This will, then, with its three codicils, makes the following principal provisions:—

"The testator directs that the whole of his property at his death, including houses, land, furniture, and effects, of all kind whatsoever, to be sold forthwith, and the amount realised to be added to that forming the personal estate.

"This whole sum to be held by the executors and trustees, their heirs, executors, and assigns, and to be by them invested in any Government or guaranteed stock, in trust for his grand-daughter Muriel, at present the only child of his son Ralph Carwithen, until the attainment of her eighteenth year, when the whole becomes hers absolutely.

"A sum of five hundred a year to be deducted from the yearly interest of the said capital, and set aside for her maintenance, until she reaches the age specified.

"The first codicil directs that to his son, the said Ralph Carwithen, shall be paid an annuity for life of eight hundred pounds sterling, the said annuity to be drawn, in like manner, from the interest of the capital, and to be paid quarterly, the first quarter to date from three months after decease.

"The second directs to Hannah Sporl an annuity of fifty pounds, to be drawn and paid in like manner.

"The third and last, executed only a few days before his death, provides that in the event of the decease of the said Muriel Carwithen before her attaining the specified age of eighteen years, the whole estate is still to be held in trust by the said executors and trustees until the date upon which she would have, if she had been living, attained that age, when it is to pass absolutely to the testator's next-of-kin, save and except his son Ralph, or any other of his children by his present or any other future marriage.

"This, then, my dear Colonel, is in substance the contents of this most wretched will, upon which great care and elaboration has evidently been spent, all tending to show his intention to make your child the heiress at your cost, and to destroy the family name and prestige, as witness the sale of the landed estate, and the omission of any clause directing that if Muriel marries, her husband is to take her name.

"As it is impossible to fathom the inner workings of a fellow-creature's mind, I can offer no valid suggestions as to the reasons that prompted your father to act as he has done. It might have been hatred to yourself, or it might have been that most wretched and contemptible vain-glorious ambition,

shown by a few ignorant, avaricious, and despicable men, to have it said after their death that they died worth so much, and to possess the knowledge that their beloved money, which they cannot take with them, will increase and multiply at compound interest for many years to come.

"Eccentricity of character is often a cause of strange wills, and that your father was eccentric no one can venture to deny; but he was nothing more, as all about him at the last can testify, adducing proofs of the clearness of his intellect to the last.

"Even your old nurse Hannah, upon whom I counted as being the most likely to offer some shred of evidence in support of the plea of insanity, can only say as the others, and, moreover, was present when that last codicil was made and witnessed by his two doctors, who would never have signed their names if there had been any doubts of their patient's state of mind, according to their own judgment, which might not, however, have been that of others. No, we cannot oppose it with any reasonable grounds of success, for there is no law in England, more's the pity, to prevent anyone from disposing of his property by will in any way it pleases him; and in your father's case, he has even left it to a relative, and a near one.

"The estate, not being entailed, could legally be sold as directed, and further, the reversion of the property in the event of the death of the heiress shows a certain amount of forethought and knowledge that someone related to the family would ulteriorly possess the wealth if that event occurred.

"For although, I suppose, there remains no doubt that your half-brother Louis is no more,

still an old English family has many ramifications; and although you perhaps do not know of any living relations, you may rest assured that if the child dies, the scent of such an immense fortune, which I calculate will be at least £400,000 at the time of the appointed majority, will soon bring upon the scene some hungry cousins ever so many times removed.

"No, my dear Colonel, nothing remains to be done. We must accept it as right in law if wrong in equity, and believe me, I feel as sore on the subject as if it were my own case, and which must be my excuse for troubling you with such a long letter, which has, however, been a relief to my feelings, and I trust of service to you, as in it I have striven to expose the whole present situation, and respectfully tendered my humble advice on the same.

"Trusting that yourself, wife, and child are in the enjoyment of perfect health, and awaiting any further instructions,—Believe me to be, your most obedient friend and servant,

"JOHN LIDGETT.

"Colonel Ralph Carwithen, C.B., V.C.,
Morar, India."

"Not much comfort to be derived from that," muttered the Colonel, replacing the letter on the table. "It seems hard to have to give up what is rightfully one's own without a struggle, but I see clearly it would be of no use. Everything seems to have been done according to our law, which allows any man to make a fool of himself with his money any way he chooses.

"There seems to be no way out of it.

"If there had been, Lidgett would have seen it. He is a sharp fellow, and has my interests at heart, of that I'm sure. Besides, Hannah's letter only confirms what he says, and she ought to know whether the old man was all right in his head or not, having been constantly with him of late years, and she is decided enough on that point.

"What is it she says?

"Poor, dear, old soul," continued he, a pleasant smile lighting up his sombre features as he took up the letter. "What an undertaking for her to write at such a length, and all out of her own head, as she would say.

"Age does not seem to have changed her handwriting a bit, for I well remember it, although I have not seen it for years. The same stiff, formal letters, with phraseology and spelling as quaint as the writing, all the sentences running into one another, and no capital letters except to names.

"I must read it over again, for I confess to have almost forgotten the old Devonshire dialect; but it seems to come back to me, for the dear old soul just writes as she talks, and I seem to hear her speaking to me, and trying to comfort me as in the miserable days of my childhood."

"*September* 19*th*, 1868.

"DEAR MAISTER RALP,—i need not tell ee as how yer poor fether be ded and gone, as lawyer Lidgett he sez to me as ow ee wood rite and brake the nuse, not as i se they wants much braking, considerin as ow the general and yew was not as fethers and sons usualy be, and more fault to yer fether sez i, but i pittis the way in which, after

all that ritin on them grate pieces of blew paper as lawyer Lidgett ee calls a will, and ading crokidil upon crokidil, ee as left is own son but little, and all to a chit of a chile, god fergive me for hers yewr darter, but I doant now her and i nows yew, and my pore ed is dazed like thinking of sich wickednes, and as now no true mon Carwithen can ever again come to is rights and live in the ouse is grandfer lived and deed in, and wher i carried ee about in my por ole arms.

"oh dear maister doant be angered with me for ritin to yew, but i thought i must zay ow zorry i be fur ee, and lawyer Lidgett ee sez as ow if they cood make ole man not rite wen ee made is will and put in that ther last crokidil, it wood do ee good, and lawyer Lidgett ee ask me a lode of things, but no use, ole man was as sharp as ever afore ee dide, and two days afore ee dide ee made crokidil and got them ere doctors to see, and if ee was not rite them never wood, and i carnt but zay the truthe, so i am feard no goode to cum of it and better let things be and hopping yew are well as i be at present.—from yewr dootiful ole nurse, HANNAH."

"No more consolation in that than in Lidgett's," murmured the reader while folding up the letter. "Pretty much about the same, although expressed in a more homely fashion. 'Crokodil,' what a funny expression; but not a bad one in my case, for that last codicil was a stumper for me, and could only have emanated from a being possessed of a reptile mind, although I should have hated the idea that my child's death would be my gain."

"Halloo," raising his voice, "is that you, Muriel?" as the rustling of a purdah, that covered the entrance into the other room, caused him to turn his head and catch a glimpse of the laughing face of a young child peeping in. "Come and tell papa what you want."

No further invitation was needed, for the child, a little girl of some five summers, but small for her age, and with dark features like her father, danced into the room, followed, but more sedately, by a tall, handsome woman, the mother evidently from the likeness.

"Papa, papa," cried out the little one, throwing herself into the outstretched arms held out to receive her, "Mury come to kiss papa and say good-night, and mamma say if you not make haste you late for dinner."

"And Muriel is right, Ralph; the first call went some time ago, and as the General is coming, you ought not to be late at mess," added his wife. "But what is the matter with you? You are not ill, I hope; and what are all these papers? You have had news from home, I suppose. Is your father dead at last?"

"Yes, he is dead," replied the Colonel gloomily; "but that's not the worst. You can see for yourself what it is if you read this letter from Lidgett. It is a long story, and I cannot stay now, so read the letter, and tell me afterwards what you think of it. And now, Mury, dear, kiss papa, for he must go and dress, and then go along with Nannha, who, I see, has come for you, and mamma will follow you directly," and kissing the child, the Colonel made for his dressing-room.

"Come soon, mamma, dear," cried out Muriel as

she walked demurely off with her ayah. "Mury wants to say her prayers, and she can't say God bless dear papa and mamma, and make them very good and happy, if mamma not there to hear."

"Directly papa has gone I will come, dear," said her mother, looking up from the papers her husband had given to her, and in the contents she became so profoundly engrossed that a hand laid upon her shoulder made her start.

"Well," said her husband, "what do you think of it?"

"I can hardly make it out, it seems so horrid, so wicked and unnatural; but, Ralph, does it really mean that all the money and everything now belongs to Muriel and not to you?"

"Yes, that's just it; but I can't stay now to explain. Put all the papers into that drawer and lock them up, as I don't wish anyone else to see them. And, I say, you must take care of Muriel now, she is worth looking after; it would never do for all this to go to the mythical next-of-kin."

"What do you mean? Do not I always look after my child? You surely do not intend to imply that I do not love her; but, then, you would believe anything of me now, I suppose."

"No, no," said her husband hurriedly, "I don't mean anything of the sort. It was only a way of speaking, like when people possess some valuable thing they say we must take extra care of this. But, good-night, I must be off," and so saying he hurried out of the room, and his hasty step could be heard crossing the compound that separated his own from the mess bungalow.

For a few minutes the wife thus left without a kiss or an endearing word remained motionless;

then gathering up the letters, she was just on the point of opening the drawer to place them within, when a cry from the child to make haste and come caused her to drop them on the table, and leaving her task unfulfilled, she hurried from the room.

She had scarcely done so, in fact the purdah still shook as it had fallen from her hand, when stealthily, with noiseless tread, a small but neat-made and decidedly handsome dark man, of gentlemanly appearance, stole into the room through the door opening on to the verandah.

"*Per Bacco!*" said the newcomer softly, "I'm in luck to-night. I watched our dear friend the Colonel into the mess-room, and what with the dinner and the lottery, he is good there for the next four hours. Time enough for me to come to some understanding with the signora; she is not half deep enough in the toils as yet.

"But what are all these papers? Place looks like a lawyer's office. 'Last will and testament of General Hubert Carwithen,'" muttered he, rapidly glancing at the document.

"This is interesting, and this more so," taking up the lawyer's letter, "as it, I suppose, explains matters more clearly. So the General's dead. Let's see how he's left his money—to his dear son Ralph, I suppose.

"Next-of-kin, the next-of-kin," repeated he, after reading the letter, while a curious smile broke over his rather saturnine features. "If Muriel dies, it all comes to the General's next-of-kin, save and except his son Ralph, and any of his family. Thank you, Colonel, very good of you to let your correspondence lie about. No love-making to-night, plenty

to think about without that. The child is five now, I believe; thirteen years before she inherits, or anyone else if she dies. Thirteen is an unlucky number, and it seems a long time for anyone to wait. No saying, however, what may happen in that time—children's lives are precarious, particularly in this country. But I must not stay here talking to myself. I must get home and well think over it, and strike out some plan to improve the occasion, and benefit myself if possible. I have no doubt some of my good native friends in Gwalior will prove of use to me in this matter, and I may never get such a chance again, for I suppose they will be sending the heiress to England for her education, and all that, shortly. I will send for one or two of the rascals to-night, and see what they advise." And so saying the intruder quitted the room as stealthily as he had entered.

CHAPTER III.

A FAMILY HISTORY.

Carwithen Farm, the home of the Carwithens, was distant some four miles from Tavistock, and situated in the midst of a country, wild but beautiful, in which rivers, rocks, wood, hill and valley, combined to form that picturesque whole—the pride and glory of Devon—the romantic Dartmoor.

Standing in rising ground, it overlooked the River Tavy, with its numerous reaches and bends, and embraced in the distance the granite tors and lonely wastes of the moorland, with its undying records of Celtic antiquity.

Cultivated fields and green pasture land, here and there dotted with the cottages of the labourer, and sundry houses of a more pretentious type, the abode of the farmers, formed its more immediate surroundings, making together one of these exquisite views of mingled rugged and peaceful scenery oftentimes afforded in an English landscape.

An avenue of stately trees, whose moss-covered

trunks and hanging festoons of ivy and creeping plants testified to their antiquity, led to the house, a substantial building, but of no particular style or character. A mixture rather of many, showing the changes and alterations it had undergone at the hands of the various members of the family since it came into their possession many centuries ago.

Originally a farmhouse, called, however, "The Farm," as being of a superior stamp to the rather primitive dwellings that surrounded it in earlier days, it bore this designation until the grandfather of the recently deceased General, a more ambitious man than his predecessors, altered its ancient name to that of Carwithen Farm, a compromise to the dignity both of the house and family.

Up to the period of his entering upon possession of the house and lands, about the commencement of the eighteenth century, the family had been simple farmers, or rather yeomen, as it was their pride and boast that their hands had never tilled other than their own soil.

They were a sturdy race, proud of their descent, and real Devonshire men, speaking the dialect of the country only, rare stay-at-homes, never going far away, except to enjoy in their leisure moments the pleasures of the chase, and taking but little interest in what was passing outside their own somewhat limited circle.

This easy mode of life so long enjoyed was, however, destined to undergo a change; and from simple yeomen they developed into Devonshire squires, interested in the political affairs of the day, and in other matters even outside their own county.

And it happened thus! !

One Hubert Carwithen, who flourished towards the latter end of the seventeeth century, had issue by his marriage, somewhat late in life, two sons and one daughter.

The elder, Hubert, according to family custom, that name having been borne from time immemorial by the son and heir, was older than his brother Robert by two years, a twelvemonth dividing the last from their sister.

The children, left pretty much to themselves, for their mother had died soon after the birth of the girl, grew up as others do, time developing in each his or her particular nature.

And the two brothers afforded a contrast; for while Hubert, the exact image of his father, and his counterpart in every way, "a true Carwithen," as the old man proudly remarked, the younger, Robert, was in his estimation but a poor creature, not caring for field sports or rough games, but only for solitude and books.

A change in the fortunes of the younger was, however, to occur, and one that altered the whole after tenour of his life, as also the social position of the whole family.

When seventeen years of age, Hubert was killed by a fall out hunting, and the stricken father dying of grief at his loss some twelve months after, Robert found himself at the age of sixteen in possession of the family estate, under guardianship until he attained the legal majority.

This interval was spent at school and college, and when he entered upon his kingdom, with his sister as lady of the house, very little trace was left of the kindly but somewhat rough and ready

Carwithens of older days, education and contact with refined and enlightened minds had made both boy and girl gentlefolk in every sense of the word, and equal to take their standing in the best society the county afforded.

Following the bent of his inclinations, the first task of the present head of the family was to enlarge the ancient house, carefully leaving, however, intact the older portions. Additions at times to the original cottage, and laying out gardens and pleasure grounds, soon rendered his habitation what he intended it should be, the home of a country gentleman, where he was content to live; and never taking any great lead in the somewhat excited political doings of that time, the habits of his early life yet clinging to him, for without being a bookworm he remained a student, and led a quiet, retired life.

If there was one thing that interested him above all others it was the doings of the East India Company in India, at this time being constantly brought to the notice of the public owing to the various struggles it was engaged in with the French, who strenuously opposed the further growth of an enterprise which had progressed rapidly since the establishment of the first factory at Surat some seventy years before.

Left much to himself, for his sister had long since married, he thought and pondered so over what he heard and read on the subject that he formed an inward resolve that if ever he should marry and be blessed with a son, the boy should be educated entirely with the view of adding to the family greatness, in camp or council, in the far East.

And his dream was fulfilled.

For meeting with his fate in the person of Emily Bastard, daughter of a neighbouring squire, he married, and a son and heir was born to them in due course, and which happened to be some five years before the genius of Clive, in 1751, gave the French their first great check, which resulted in their final overthrow a little later on.

From an early age the lad showed a desire and aptitude for learning, rare to find in these days, and when he became old enough to fully comprehend the desire of his father's heart, he strained every effort to prepare himself for the career marked out, choosing, however, the civil and not the military as the path of glory he was to follow.

At this the elder Carwithen was secretly pleased, as it chimed in more with his own tastes, and it was with a proud heart but swimming eyes that he embraced and blessed his only child, who, before he had attained the age of seventeen, set out from home for the land of Ind, to conquer a position amongst the rulers of that country, and to take a shake at the pagoda tree, about that period in full blossom. He arrived at an opportune moment, Warren Hastings being at that time in the full enjoyment of supreme power; and that best abused of all officials in India, both past and present, being gifted with a keen perception of other people's merit, soon perceived that the young writer was of the true metal, and two years after his arrival found Hubert Carwithen Assistant-Collector in Lower Bengal. His foot now fairly planted on the ladder of promotion,

it came rapidly, and before the death of the father the old man had the happiness of knowing that his son was on the high road to attain the exalted position marked out for him at his birth.

And his success was not undeserved; for in his character there was a rare and happy union of the qualities which are necessary to the administration of a country like India, with its hostile classes, its religions and other prejudices, while the sense of responsibility, the boundless scope offered to individual energy, joined to the ample discretion allowed to Indian officials in those days, gave incentive and play to constant efforts, which, to a gifted and steadfast mind like his own, gave the opportunity that was wanted.

Rising rapidly through the several grades of the Civil Service, he found himself at a comparatively early age provided with a seat at the council board, and head of a commission appointed to regulate the permanent settlement of the land revenue of Bengal.

This occupied some time, and on its completion he sailed for Europe on furlough, after an absence of thirty-five years. He found the old house dull and empty, for his mother and sister were also dead, and the society of his native country insipid after his bustling life, so he spent a good deal of his time in London, and within a year married the daughter of one of the directors of the board of the Company.

Two children were born of the marriage, a boy and a girl, the birth of the latter, however, costing the mother her life, while the infant survived but a few hours.

Left a widower, Hubert Carwithen soon sailed again for the scene of his former triumphs, his son being left to the care of a distant female relative.

Some few years later he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, a post which he filled with the highest distinction until his final retirement and return home, to find his son a fine grown lad of fourteen, with marked proclivity for a military life, in which he was not to be disappointed, for passing through the course of study at Haileybury College, the influence of his father soon procured a cadetship in the Company's service, and the eventful year of the battle of Waterloo found him in India. Not many opportunities of distinction fell at first to his lot, for the years that followed his arrival were periods of peaceful progress, excepting the Burmese war. A severe wound received in that campaign caused him to revisit his native land after some years of absence, and to find his father, "The Governor," as he was always called, a hale, hearty old man, but with a decided will of his own. This he soon put in practice, by marrying his son, very much against his will, to a lady he had chosen to be the wife of the heir, whose heart had long ago been given to a Calcutta belle, and who from that time hated his father, his wife, and himself for his weakness in not resisting the parental demand. A few years later the governor died, but not before he had nursed his grandson, who, to his sorrow and dismay, did not, however, bear the time-hallowed name of Hubert, the father having his way in this, and saying that never a child of that woman should ever bear

his Christian name, or one ever borne by any member of the family.

The wife was too heart-broken by ill-treatment and neglect, and the old man too feeble to resist, and the child consequently was, as we have already seen, called Ralph.

His childhood was not happy, for his mother, broken in health and spirit, led during the absence of her husband, who had returned to India, a very retired life with the child and his nurse Hannah, both being devoted to the invalid, who faded peacefully away when Ralph was seven years old, much to his grief, for he loved his mother fondly.

News of the event was sent out to the Colonel, for he had now attained that rank, and who soon after married his former flame, a dark beauty of decidedly mixed race.

One son was born to them, and shortly after an attack of cholera sent the unfortunate mother to an early grave, and the child to England, consigned to the care of Hannah at Carwithen Farm.

This addition to the family was not received with much favour either by the nurse or by Ralph, who from the first cordially disliked his oriental-looking half-brother Louis, who, when he was old enough, returned the same with interest, which soon deepened into bitter hatred.

Time went on, and the head of the family, now Major-General Carwithen, C.B., retired from the service, and came home for good, and Ralph, who had just passed out of Haileybury, after paying a brief and miserable visit to the place of his birth, set out for India, at the age of seventeen, with

much the same feelings as a desolate orphan, his father giving him clearly to understand that he hated him, and never wanted to see or hear anything more about him.

Commencing his career as a subaltern in the famous 1st Bengal Cavalry, Ralph soon found himself on active service in the second Punjaub war, and after a few years' comparative quiet, during which he advanced to the rank of captain, saw him engaged with his regiment in the suppression of the Sepoy revolt.

Opportunities of distinction were not rare at these times, and Captain Carwithen soon showed that the blood of the old race coursed in his veins, for saving at great risk to himself the life of a brother officer, he earned the enviable distinction of the Victoria Cross, and some little time after his majority, and the name amongst the natives of Peela Shaitan, or Yellow Devil, partly from the ruthless manner in which, according to their idea, he stormed the refuge of some two hundred rebels at the head of his men, and left only corpses behind him, and partly from the colour of his uniform, yellow being worn by both officers and men of Skinner's horse.

Four years after the suppression of the revolt, a trip to Simla brought about a result not uncommon at that charming resort.

The Colonel there saw and was conquered by a young girl of twenty-two, just out from England, a daughter of an old Indian officer, lately deceased, and who leaving nothing to the widow and child, Grace Royland now found herself at that age governess in the family of an Indian official of high rank.

Tall, dark, and decidedly handsome, well educated, but reserved in manner, she had already created some sensation, which was increased by her engagement and subsequent marriage.

Many said she never cared for him, but to all outward appearance they were happy enough at first, though latterly gossip had it they were not so, rumours of flirtation with a certain Count Luigi Corsi, an Italian in the service of the Maharajah of Gwalior, having reached the husband's ears, and troubled his repose.

They had now been married six years, and Muriel was their only child, a pretty little thing, diminutive in stature, but finely formed, with abundant silky hair, and features dark, decidedly for an English girl; but, then, both her parents were also so, the mother being of a decided brunette type.

She was a bright, intelligent, dear little thing —the pride and joy of her father, now Colonel Commandant of his own regiment, strict and stern on duty, but respected, even loved by all his officers and men, while to her mother she was as life itself.

Such was the condition of affairs when the lawyer's letter arrived, he having been the sole informant concerning the family Ralph Carwithen had ever had since his departure from home. The good man, however, up to this period, had never written anything very new or startling, save and except that, at the age of twenty-three, the General's younger son, Louis, on whom he lavished all the love his cold nature would allow, had quarrelled with his father and left his home, no trace ever having been discovered of him, save that a man

answering to the description had enlisted into the Pontifical Zouaves, and had been killed in action —a story vouched for by the finding of some small trinkets known to be his on the body of the dead soldier.

CHAPTER IV.

AT MESS.

A VERY different scene from the one he had just left broke on the Colonel as he entered the ante-room in the mess bungalow of his own regiment, a fairish-sized room, lighted by two large lamps, and sundry smaller ones fixed against the wall, which was further adorned by a few prints and pictures, chiefly of a sporting character.

A couple of sofas and numerous chairs, a small bookcase, and a large table, piled high with newspapers, the fruits of the last mail, completed the furniture of the room, now filled to overflowing by officers, both young and old, and in every variety of uniform, relieved here and there by the black coat and white tie of a civilian of sporting proclivities come to attend the Morar race-meeting.

All were talking together in groups about the news in the papers just received, and of the last gazette, a subject dear to soldiers, and all expressed

a look often seen on the faces of guests at a dinner party awaiting a late guest.

A slight bustle at the door soon announced the arrival of the chief host, who with a stern-set face entered the room, and amidst the respectful greetings of his own officers and the guests, quietly pushed his way through the throng to that part of the apartment where stood the General, to whom he at once proffered an apology for his tardy appearance.

This was at once granted, and the two fell into conversation, which, however, was soon disturbed by the entrance of the khansamah, resplendent in yellow cloth with gold braid, who announced with a profound salaam dinner was served, an announcement followed by a general exodus to the adjoining room.

Most of the mess-rooms of the officers in Her Majesty's service in India possess many features in common as to furniture and decoration, but the 1st Bengal, an old regiment, had during its existence amassed a considerable amount of treasures, which now adorned the walls and table. A large, lofty room, taking up the whole centre of the bungalow, with its ante-room and billiard-room on either side, the entrance to each concealed by heavy purdahs of the regimental colour, a floor covered with China matting, and walls painted yellow of a canary tint.

Very little of the colour could, however, be observed, for every available space on the four walls was taken up by antlers, horns, heads, and skins, trophies of the chase, together with a glistening array of ancient and modern weapons, and dearer to officers and men than the costliest paint-

"Then I will refer you to our friend here, as no one can explain it better. Let's sit down, light a cheroot, and then, Carwithen, on you go, to induct the young and innocent mind of our friend here into the mysteries of a selling lottery."

"You see," commenced the Colonel, after taking a tremendous pull at one of his favourite Trichy's, "there is one great peculiarity attending horse-racing in India, and that is, there is no ring, no layers of odds, and consequently little or no betting. Such being the case, owners or fanciers of horses must seek other means to back their opinion, and this they can do up to a certain amount by the lottery, held the night before, on every event on the card, and quite an institution of the country.

"Let us take, by way of illustration, a lottery on the first race to-morrow, for which six horses, I know, are entered. Their names will be called out by the secretary, who will further state the amount required to be subscribed to fill it up, and who enters in a book the names of those taking tickets, against the numbers they select, which are from one to a hundred. A hundred subscribers, with tickets ten rupees each, making a thousand rupee lottery, is a very usual one, but it may be more or less, according to circumstances.

"When the whole of the hundred numbers have been filled up, the names of the horses are then drawn for; each being gained by the individual who owns the number drawn simultaneously.

"When all the horses have been drawn, the selling part begins, each horse being put up to auction and knocked down to the highest bidder,

who has to pay double the amount it has fetched, half of which goes to the general fund of the lottery, the other half to the original drawer of the horse.

"This is the time for owners to back their horses, by buying them in, and if they fear any other horse as likely to interfere with their favourite, to buy him as well; and if competition is brisk, and prices high, the total of the lottery often becomes double or treble the value of the original amount, and each lucky drawer gets a very good return for the outlay on his tickets."

"Thank you, thank you, Colonel," said the M.P., who had listened attentively. "Your description is most complete, and I now understand what it means; and I confess I rather like the system, as you can back your horse and not lose very much if it does not win. I suppose the losses of anyone on the Indian turf never comes up to anything like what it is sometimes at home?"

"Can't be," answered the General, "unless one makes heavy bets outside the lottery, which is not often the case, although a little mild betting does, of course, go on. But I see the youngsters moving off, so you had better follow them and try your luck. I'm getting too old now for that sort of thing, so shall go quietly home. See you to-morrow; you can't well miss me, for I shall be at the winning-post, acting as judge. So good-night, and good fortune to both of you."

On entering the mess-room, the Colonel and his guest found it full to overflowing, and the talk and noise already was enough to show that

the post of secretary to-night would prove no sinecure.

At the head of the table sat St Leger, a big book before him denoting his official capacity, and close beside him stood Aylmer, in a highly excited condition, for it was his first appearance at any such scene, and filling up the long board were sitting a number of men, whose eager but subdued manner, and the note-books they held, showed plainly that business, not pleasure only, was the object they had in view.

"Silence, gentlemen, if you please," suddenly cried out St Leger, and which repeated had the desired effect. "The lottery on the 'Hunter's Plate' is now open, and I will read out the names of the horses entered, and owners or their representatives will be so good as to say whether they accept or not. 'The Hermit,' ten stone four, Captain Somers."

"Accept," answered the owner in a loud voice.

"'Blue Peter,' ten stone eleven, Mr Unwin."

"Accept," was the reply from a mere youth.

"'Merrylegs,' eleven stone two, Doctor Smithson."

"Accept," said the sporting owner, a well-known officer of hussars from Muttra.

"'The Bantam,' eleven stone, Captain Peters."

"Accept," replied the gallant owner in a cheery voice.

"'Redskin,' eleven stone four, Captain St Leger. Accept for myself," continued he, laughing.

"'Gitana,' ten stone twelve, Count Corsi. 'Gitana,' Count Corsi," repeated St Leger in a loud voice, and as no reply came, "Scratched," said he, running his pen through the name in the book before him.

"Sorry 'Gitana's' out of it," said a horsey-looking little man, with a moustache several sizes too big for his small face. "The veterinary surgeon of a cavalry regiment in the Punjaub heard she was a clipper, and meant to buy her in on spec. Does anyone know anything about her, or why the owner's not here to accept? Do you know, St Leger?"

"Not a bit. I rather wonder the Count is not here, as he was full of the mare the other day; but no one has ever seen what she can do. Appears to be a dark one, like her owner," muttered St Leger to himself, after finishing the sentence. "But now, gentlemen, the lottery is on. Five horses entered. Tickets, shall we say, five rupees each, and have the ten rupee go on the big race, the 'Charger Stakes,' which comes next."

"Yes, yes. All right, St Leger," came from nearly all present, and then the babel began.

"Put me down numbers twenty and thirty, St Leger."

"I'll take the ten first."

"Toss you for two tickets."

"Put me down four tickets."

"Six, Smith to Watson."

"Five for me, St Leger. Any numbers you like."

"Three for me—score them down."

Such were the cries that went on, diversified by the rattle of the dice in tossing for tickets, and the laughing or chaffing of the company generally for a good half-hour, when St Leger declared the lottery closed, and the drawing for the horses commenced.

This was soon concluded, and the bidding for the several entries was brisk enough, but nothing very remarkable, all being anxious to get on to the next, the chief race of the day, each owner buying in his own nomination without much opposition from the rest of the company.

"Now, gentlemen, we will take the 'Charger Stakes,'" sang out St Leger. "Three horses entered. Weights, twelve stone all. Distance, mile and a half. Lottery tickets, ten rupees."

The announcement was received with applause, for this was to be the race of the meeting, and further, a trial of strength between the artillery and cavalry; for although three horses were entered, everyone took it for granted that the race might be looked upon as a match between 'The Cid,' owner Colonel Carwithen, and 'Tam o' Shanter,' belonging to the popular commander of the Horse Artillery, Major Denis O'Reilly. Each had his partisans, and all gathered nearer to the table, as the lottery would be a good one, and the lucky drawer certain to obtain a high price for his prize, as competition would be brisk, for there were others present besides the owners of the horses prepared to bid high for either one or both.

"'The Cid,' Colonel Carwithen."

"Accept," said the Colonel, moving towards the secretary, closely followed by Mr Saunders, who had never left his side all the evening, and who had already arranged in his own mind the chapter on horse-racing in India in the book he was now determined to publish.

"'Tam o' Shanter,' Major O'Reilly."

"Accept," in stentorian tones from the Major, a finely-built man of over six feet in height, and broad and strong in proportion, and whose twinkling eyes, brimming over with merriment, betokened a happy, good-natured temperament.

"'Banshee,' Captain Simcox," continued St Leger.

"Accept," quietly responded the owner, an officer of the artillery.

"Who rides 'The Cid'?" asked Major O'Reilly in a loud voice; "it's not compulsory, is it, owners up? If so, my chance would be small, looking to my size and build."

"I do," came in a quiet tone from the very end of the table.

All turned to look at the speaker, and the faces of many fell on recognising in that lean, sallow face and active form the well-known Captain Hartley of the Central India Horse, one of the best of riders on the flat in all India.

"The devil, you do," said O'Reilly ruefully; "that's a bad lookout for me, as I rather counted on you for 'Tam.' But look here, my boy, can't you chuck over the Colonel? 'The Cid's' no use against my horse. I really want you to get the gold-mounted whip I mean to give my jockey after the win."

"That's what you were after this afternoon, was it, Denis?" said Hartley laughing. "I saw you rummaging about in old Lewis's shop; awfully sorry I can't oblige you, for I should like to have got the whip."

"With a real gold head to it."

"You should have brought it with you, Major,

it might have tempted him," observed Colonel Carwithen quietly.

"So I ought, Colonel, but I could not find one, so wrote to Calcutta for a stunner; but it's no good now. You see, he won't take a good thing when it is offered. Seems now like giving it to the buyer, for I don't know who to ask. Suppose I must ride the beast myself. Sha'n't want any lead, that's one thing; can easily turn the scale at twelve, and something over."

A hearty laugh followed this remark, and it had scarcely died away when a short thick-set little man, in civilian dress, pushed his way up to where the last speaker was sitting, and tapping him on the shoulder, whispered,—

"Never mind, Major, I'll ride for you."

"Now, that's kind of you, Slater," said O'Reilly, looking highly delighted at something. "Gentlemen all," continued he, raising his voice, "you will be pleased to hear that our sporting friend Mr Slater is so good as to say he will ride for me."

A roar of laughter followed this announcement, for the individual named, who belonged to the Public Works Department, was a source of great delight to the whole station, by the airs and affectations he gave himself, on the strength of having been born in Yorkshire, on all matters connected with horseflesh.

In appearance he looked like a jockey, and he dressed like one, but here it ended, for his riding was, to say the least, weak, and his driving weaker, few being daring enough to accompany him on a particularly high dogcart he was very proud of.

This sporting character did not appear to be

in any way abashed at the manner in which his offer was received by the majority present, but manfully stood his ground awaiting the Major's reply.

"Well," said O'Reilly at last, "I know you mean well, my boy, but there's one thing against it."

"What's that?" eagerly said the other.

"Well, it's just this. Jockeys, like poets and tea-tasters, are born to it. You can't make them. Nature, certainly, cast you in the mould of one, and there she stopped, and forgot to finish you. You are a most horsey man on foot, I grant, but in the saddle it is just the other way, and that prevents my availing myself of your valuable services while you are yet, as I may say, in embryo."

This sally of the Major's was received with peals of laughter, under cover of which the would-be jockey slunk off to hide his diminished head, but not for long—he was used to it.

The lottery had during this time been filling fast, and was now closed, and the drawing of the horses was soon done. The selling part was exciting, both the favourites being run up to a big price, but eventually were knocked down to their respective owners. The Major, who in the meantime had secured the services of a well-known performer in the pigskin for his horse, buying in also "Banshee," the third in the race, so as he said there should be no mistake about it.

The chief interest of the evening was now over, and many of the seniors left quietly, the others remaining to fill up the lotteries in the "Ladies' Purse" and a hurdle race. These did not take much time, and no particular incident occurred to delay the proceedings, the sporting Mr Slater

entering his horse for the hurdles, and avowing his intention to ride, an announcement received with incredulous smiles by all, and by the Major with an offer to lay him ten to one he fell off before the finish.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RACES.

THE racecourse at Morar was on a "maidan," the most level piece of ground that could be found near the station, surrounded as it is on all sides by a country that seems to be made up of broken ground, nullahs, and sandhills.

It was situated some three miles from the Mall, in a straight line, behind the European Infantry Barracks, and was fairly enough suited for the purpose, though the term a run on the turf could hardly in justice be applied to a race on its length, sand and dust being the characteristic features of the land in this part of the world.

Very different in appearance was it from an ordinary racecourse in England; a rough erection in wood forming the grand stand, while a still ruder shanty at the side served the purpose of a committee and weighing-room. There was no betting ring; the blatant professional layer of the odds against everything and everybody, with his courier bag, red, yellow or white hat and umbrella, being conspicuous by his absence.

The course, a circular one, was mapped out by rude posts, that portion only from the commencement of the run in being railed, while a small flight of wooden steps, with a broad top ledge, served the purpose of a judge's box.

The crowd assembled was a mixed assemblage, but very different from an Epsom gathering—a small number of ladies and gentlemen, thoroughly English in dress and appearance, a large number of soldiers in uniform, with white and black faces, and a still larger number of natives, of all sorts and description, and in every variety of clean or dirty costume.

The ground was kept by a few soldiers, but their services seemed hardly to be required, the crowd being orderly enough, the native element, excepting the warlike troopers of the Bengal Cavalry, squatting on the ground with that listless, indifferent look they usually display at any proceeding, whether a marriage, a funeral, a feast, or a hanging, even if the latter performance affected their own or their relatives' necks.

The difference between the present scene and its surroundings, from what he was accustomed to, struck Mr Saunders very forcibly, and although admitting to himself that it was novel and picturesque, still he was desirous of knowing whether grander affairs of the sort did not come off in India. Finding himself quite close to the General, now standing near his post, he asked the question.

"Certainly, certainly, my dear sir," he replied; "this meeting can only be looked upon as a small one, a gymkhana meeting as we call it, the station being too far out for owners to send their horses,

consequently we have to draw pretty much on our own resources to fill up the card. There are, however, some very good meetings in India, and both the horses competing and the value of the stakes are equal to many similar gatherings at home."

"Which do you call the best meeting, General?" asked Mr Saunders.

"Well, the Sanapur meeting is perhaps the largest attended of any in the Bengal Presidency, drawing people from all parts of India to participate in its pleasures or profits. Then the Calcutta meeting is also a large one, and well attended, and one race in particular, the 'Derby Stakes,' for Arabs, calls forth a numerous entry of that class of animal, and creates amongst owners and trainers out here as much excitement as prevails over its great namesake at Epsom.

"Each of the other Presidency towns has also its annual meeting, and some of the larger stations follow suit; another thing I may tell you, that some of the richer class of natives have taken to it immensely of late years, and with English trainers, their stables are now not to be despised.

"And about riding, General? Do only gentleman jockeys ride in the different races?"

"Well, no; at small meetings it may be the case, good riders being found in every regiment. But for the big events English professionals are engaged, many of whom are to be found out here; and the number of natives who yearly enter the lists is on the increase. Some ride uncommonly well, I must say. But, hulloa, I must mount up to my perch now," continued the General, laughing. "I see

Carwithen has got the horses in line, and it will not be long before the judge's services are called into requisition."

It was as he said, for scarcely had he mounted to his stand when the flag fell to a good start, and soon the six horses entered for the "Hunter's Plate" came thundering by.

The first to catch the judge's eye being "Merry-legs," belonging to the sporting surgeon of hussars, and ridden by himself, "Redskin," Captain St Leger, a good second, and "Blue Peter," Mr Unwin of the artillery, third.

Directly the race was over everyone streamed over the course in the direction of the grand stand and weighing enclosure, to compliment the winner, and to look at the horses engaged for the next race. The hopes of the partisans of "The Cid" mounted higher and higher, and the swarthy faces of the troopers glowed with delight, for their regiment had scored one against the artillery already, for although not first, St Leger had beaten the gunner by a good length for second place.

Most of the ladies were on the stand, from whence a good view of the whole course could be obtained; but a few remained in their carriages, grouped near to the winning-post, and amongst this number was Grace Carwithen the Colonel's wife.

Faultlessly attired, she reclined in the well-appointed barouche, with a haughty expression on her handsome face, eyeing the other ladies defiantly, and being well stared at by them in return.

For, truth to say, she was no favourite with her own sex in the cantonment of Morar.

They took it ill, to commence with, that a burra-mem-sahib like the cavalry colonel's wife should only originally have been a poor governess.

Then she was handsome, clever, always well dressed, and the men admired her.

She, on her side, took no pains to conciliate them or win their regard, for she was, or appeared to be, indifferent to what others said or thought of her, never indulging in station gossip, or forming any of those fleeting female friendships, which, however, are not peculiar to India.

As may be imagined, the scandal connecting her name with the too assiduous attentions of the fascinating Count was a perfect godsend to her friends, as they called themselves, and like a snowball once set rolling, the story lost nothing in the telling.

Whispers of what was said often reached her ears, but to the bitter disappointment of her would-be tormentors she displayed an utter indifference to all and everything, and remained, as usual, coldly polite to everyone forming the society of the station.

Still, ladies do not like to sit all alone, a cynosure for every female eye, and her face brightened when the happy-looking Dicky Aylmer jumped upon the carriage step, and heartily shook the well-gloved hand extended to him.

"I say, Mrs Carwithen," he exclaimed, "you all alone here? What a shame! How selfish we all are! But I suppose everyone has gone to look at the horses. I do hope the Colonel will win, don't

you? But of course you do. But, I say, where's my little sweetheart? Mury's not ill, I hope, as you didn't bring her with you this afternoon?"

"No," replied Grace; "I am glad to say Muriel is quite well, but I did not bring her with me, as she gets so excited. I thought it best to leave her at home. She is quite content, as Nannha is to take her to feed the fish in the big pool at the bottom of the garden. She was asking after you this morning, Mr Aylmer, and said you had not been to see her for a long time."

"No, I have not, Mrs Carwithen; it is all the fault of these races. But I shall come to-morrow and have a good romp, so tell her not to forget me till then."

"Muriel never forgets her friends," said the mother fondly, "and has, for her age, a wonderful memory. I expect if you were not to see her again for ten years or more, she would remember her 'dear Dicky,' as she always calls you."

"Ten years is a long time for young people like myself and Muriel to remain faithful to each other's memory only," said Aylmer laughing; "but I hope our constancy will not be so sorely tried. No chance of it, as I can see, Mrs Carwithen. The Colonel won't leave the regiment for a long time, neither shall I, so I shall see my little playfellow grow up by degrees, until the time comes when I can claim my first and only love."

"Many a true word is spoken in jest, Mr Aylmer," replied Grace smiling, "and when that time comes I shall hold you to your declaration of to-day. But come and see her; she is so fond of you, and misses you sadly if you do not come often."

"I will certainly call to-morrow; but, Mrs Carwithen," continued Aylmer in a serious tone, "if I were you, I would not allow the child to play too near that river, more particularly by the big pool. It is very deep now after the rains, and if anyone fell in, they would be carried right over the ledge of rock into that nasty place where the niggers say the evil spirit dwells. I don't know anything about *that*, but I do know I wouldn't give much for a fellow's chance if he tumbled in. It is full of holes and currents, and once sucked into one you'd never be seen again."

"You must not frighten me," said Grace, "by such stories. She has often been there before, and I know I can trust her with Nannha, her faithful ayah."

"I would not trust any ayah, black or white," replied Aylmer; "but I must run away now, the horses are moving off, and I am so excited about this race I can't keep quiet. Don't go until after the 'Ladies' Purse'—will you?—as I am going to ride, as you know, your nomination, and win for you, I hope," and so saying the boy ran off as fast as his legs would carry him.

He had scarcely been gone a few seconds when the occupant of the carriage started as a well-known voice behind her was heard murmuring in soft, subdued tones,—

"Good evening, my dear Mrs Carwithen," and the dark but smiling face of her so-called admirer met her astonished gaze as she turned round.

A flush of crimson mounted to Grace Carwithen's brow, but it was one of anger, not of love, as she said in a haughty manner,—

"Why do you persecute me, Count Corsi? You

know I never wished to see you again, and you know also what has been said about me, and yet you are cowardly enough to try and compromise me in the sight of the whole station. If you do not at once leave. I will drive up to where I see my husband, and I know you will not dare to follow me there."

"Don't be angry, dear lady," retorted the Italian. "I am not going to stay long enough to give your fair friends on the grand stand yonder any chance for gossip. I only want to say I have something of great importance to yourself to tell you, and something to give you. Meet me at the Gwalior Dâk Bungalow in two hours' time. You can easily go round when on your way home."

"I will not," said Grace firmly, "and you have nothing to say, nor anything to give me. You have, I know, a letter or two of mine, but they are only answers to invitations, on your part, to picnics or something, so you may keep them."

"Are they," replied the Count, while a curious smile broke over his features, which she noticed, and it created an uneasy feeling in her mind, for she had often heard him boast of his talent for imitating any handwriting given him; but she said not a word, and turning her head, looked away in the opposite direction, while seeing it was of no avail to persecute her further, the unwelcome intruder, with a "Very well, then, good-bye, Mrs Carwithen," took his departure.

He proceeded only a few yards, when suddenly he halted, took out his watch, and glancing at it, replaced it in his pocket, then continued on his way, muttering to himself the while,—

"You won't meet me now, my fine madam;

never mind, you will yet, later on. I only wanted to know where you would be for the next hour or so, while I settle our little affair. I told them to meet me at half-past four, and it is nearly that now. What a lucky thing it was these rascals turning up in Gwalior just when I wanted them; without that the business might have waited for some years. But nothing like taking advantage of a good opportunity. Besides, it clears my conscience. I don't harm the child myself, and it is nothing to my worthy friends, as putting people away, as they call it, is a part of their religion. But I must be off to set the thing going. It won't take long, as all is prepared; my talk with the faithful Nannha last night smoothed matters wonderfully," and so saying the Count went on at a brisk pace to where he had left his horse, and mounting hastily, rode rapidly away.

The competitors for the "Charger Stakes" were now marshalled at the starting-point, and after a brief delay, caused by the fractious behaviour of "Banshee," were sent on their way by the Brigade Major, who had for the time taken the duty of starter for Colonel Carwithen, that gentleman, with the owner of "Tam o' Shanter," having taken his stand close to the winning-post, to see the finish of a race in which both were so deeply interested.

They were not long kept in doubt. "Banshee," who from the first had forced the running, began to hold out signals of distress a good half-mile from home, and was soon passed by the two others, who from the start had kept together almost stride for stride.

Both jockeys now commenced to try their

utmost to gain an advantage, but the pair were so evenly matched in speed that a dead-heat seemed to be the only termination possible.

Amidst the cheers of the crowd, and cries of "Dead-heat," "It's a dead-heat," they came to within a few yards of the finish, and so it appeared to be to most of the onlookers, but at the last moment the nerve and judgment of the Colonel's jockey came into play, as with a supreme effort he landed "The Cid" a winner by a head.

The verdict of the judge, being ruefully endorsed by the Major, who insisted, however, that although beaten on the post this time, reverse the riders, and "Tam" would lick the other into fits.

As may be expected, shouts of joy arose from the throats of the troopers of the Bengal Cavalry, who tumbled over each other and everyone else in their eagerness to get near the horse and its owner.

Ralph Carwithen took most good-naturedly all the fuss and worship he was, for a time, made the object; but after seeing to the weighing in, on receiving the gratifying assurance "All right," he cordially thanked the rider, then stole quietly away, and in a few seconds was by the side of his wife's carriage.

"Well, Grace," exclaimed he, "I won, after all, you see; but it was a narrow go—thought it could only end in a dead-heat."

"It looked very like that to me here," replied his wife; "but I am very glad you won, Ralph, believe me. And now, you will not mind if I go home very soon now? I am not well. I do not know what is the matter, but I feel as if something dreadful was going to happen, and I

want to get back to see if Muriel is quite safe."

"What extraordinary ideas you do have, Grace," said her husband sharply. "You are quite well, or at least were so when I saw you last an hour ago, and as for the child—what harm can happen to her at home?"

"I do not know, but I would rather go, that is, after the next race."

"Well, go, by all means," said the Colonel, turning on his heel and striding rapidly away.

Grace looked after him wistfully until he was lost in the crowd, then, with a heavy sigh, sank back in the carriage, a prey to her own sad thoughts, until she was aroused by the cheers that betokened the finish of the race for the "Ladies' Purse."

"Poor Mr Aylmer!" said she to herself on seeing her horse a bad third, "he will be disappointed; however, that is over now, and I can go home." And giving the order, on rolled the carriage towards the bungalow.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ABDUCTION.

THE bungalow of the Carwithens was situated on the Mall, as were, in fact, most of the homes in the small, compact station of Morar.

A station of the usual type found all over India, with the exception, however, that the civil element was entirely wanting, it being purely a military camp, solely occupied by soldiers, followers, and native tradesmen, together forming a large garrison, headquarters of a brigade, with a general and accompanying staff.

Isolated and rather dull, Morar is not looked upon as a very pleasant station by officers or men, and the country round about is uninteresting. A dry, sandy waste for miles, intersected by nullahs, with little or no vegetation, and no running streams save, and except, the one river, which, however, scarcely deserves that name except in the rainy season.

The only object that may be said to break the monotony of the landscape is noticeable enough, and although nearly four miles distant,

the fortress of Gwalior, situated on a lofty isolated rock, appears quite close, and seemingly to overshadow the station.

Close under the walls of the fortress is the old city of Gwalior, curious and picturesque enough, but now almost a deserted place, presenting the appearance, in its ruinous condition, of a town that had experienced an earthquake, and whose inhabitants, fearing a repetition, had fled to the adjoining one, which rises a short distance from the ancient capital.

The difference between ancient and modern Gwalior is striking. As the former can boast of considerable antiquity, it presents all the usual incongruities of a native town. Narrow streets, with houses mean and poor, and of no architectural beauty, being its chief features. And as only a sparse number of half-starved, squalid natives are to be seen about, or in the tumble-down houses, it appears to be a city of the dead in comparison with its rival, which is reached after traversing a large open plain that separates the two.

At one extremity of this plain, and in the direction of the principal gateway of the modern city, stands the Gwalior Dâk Bungalow, a building of the usual type found all over India, for the accommodation of travellers, and which, situated a little way off the high-road, under the shadow of the frowning and precipitous rock upon which the fortress is reared, is quiet and retired enough.

In the centre of the plain stands the palace of the Maharajah of Gwalior, to the right of which is the lushkar or camp of his native army,

which at this time boasted of an adjutant-general in the person of the Count Luigi Corsi, one amongst many foreigners serving in its ranks.

From the camp a fine gateway leads into the principal thoroughfare of the new city, which affords a remarkable contrast, with its fine, well-built houses and multitude of inhabitants, to the silent and deserted town, which it has now replaced, as do its gardens, whose verdure, joined to the foliage of the trees and shrubs planted thickly on the sides of the streets, making a fresh and pleasant contrast to the neighbouring station of Morar.

For, undoubtedly, Morar is a dry and arid spot, a few trees on the Mall and a few small gardens, not too well kept, being the only relief to the eye in its glaring sandy surroundings, with the exception of the house and grounds occupied by Colonel Carwithen and his family, which was a perfect oasis in the desert, boasting as it did of a large piece of ground laid out and carefully tended, and green and gay with grass, trees, shrubs, and flowers — a legacy from its previous occupant, the principal commissariat officer, who, to say the truth, whether from love of gardening, more ample leisure, or a longer purse, are usually the occupiers of the largest houses, and the best cultivated ground in the station their lines are cast in.

The bungalow was commodious and well furnished, situated about the centre of the garden, having in front the Mall, to the right the compound of the mess of the regiment, while on the left ran the grand trunk road leading to Agra, which here crossed the river by a stone bridge,

the stream dividing the residence and grounds from a large expanse of rough broken country, beyond which stood the fortress of Gwalior and the two cities.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon; the races being in full swing some three miles away, the house and grounds were deserted, the native servants, even to the gardeners, having taken advantage of the opportunity to sleep, gossip, or smoke, the three greatest enjoyments of their placid existence.

The garden was not, however, entirely untenanted, for on a piece of ground, carefully kept and devoted to croquet, was a little girl playing at ball with her ayah, in the hearty manner one sees in children blessed with good health and spirits.

"Nannha," suddenly exclaimed Muriel, for it was the Colonel's child, throwing away the ball and taking up a large doll that lay on the grass face downwards, "mamma said Mury might go and feed the fishes in the water, so me go to the house and fetch bread to give them."

The child spoke in English, not that wretched broken Hindustani, the usual language of young children in India until they are old enough to be sent home to forget it, as also the other bad habits they never fail to acquire from native servants, to whose sole charge many frivolous and indolent mothers confide them.

With the baneful effects of this bringing up both the Colonel and his wife were well aware, and they took every care to prevent it, for since her birth the little girl was scarcely ever out of her mother's sight, and the chief servants in the house spoke

English, and were strictly bidden always to address her in that language. The wise result of all this care being that Muriel Carwithen, at the age of five, was a thoroughly healthy English child in mind, body, speech, and habits, and not a miserable stunted, peevish object, with the ideas, language, and manners of the lower orders of Hindus.

"Yes, missy," replied the ayah, "the mem-sahib, your mamma, did give the permission, so we will go to the house and get the bread. But," continued the woman, casting a keen glance along the road, "it is too early yet, missy."

"Mury wait few minutes longer time; fishes not come when sun so big. We play again at the ball, and when time come we go see plenty fish."

A good twenty minutes were passed at play, as she suggested, when suddenly descrying two men on horseback, wearing red turbans, leisurely making their way towards the bridge, her dusky face grew pale, or rather grey looking, and there was a tremor in her voice, when casting away the ball, and taking the child by the hand, she said,—

"Good time now, missy; we go and fetch bread," leading her towards the house, from whence, after a few minutes, the pair emerged and proceeded down the steep path that led to the river, which being on a lower level, between two banks, was at this spot entirely screened from sight. The path led down to a plateau washed by the waters of what was usually termed the big pool, and continued on, considerably narrower and rougher, towards the bridge, where it ended, it being used generally as a short cut to the house from the

Agra road, ingress and egress being effected by a gap in the hedge of prickly pears and aloes that surrounded the property.

It was just half-past four as the child and attendant reached the edge of the pool, which lay spread out, a large sheet of water hemmed in by rock, connected on either side by a ledge creating a sort of dam, through which, however, the current found an opening in a rift about the centre, falling over into a dark, smaller, but deeper pool, whose swirling waters, report said, hid treacherous holes and unfathomable caverns, the dwelling-places of evil spirits.

By this time the two men with the red turbans had arrived at the bridge, and dismounting, squatted side by side on the stone parapet, and motionless and silent, with eyes turned in the direction of the Mall, seemed to be awaiting the arrival of some person with whom they had an appointment. Their patience was not tasked long, for in a few minutes, at a hand-gallop, arrived the Count, true to his time. His face was a little pale, but otherwise he appeared unmoved as, nearing them, he jumped from his horse and gave a low but peculiar whistle.

The two other men regarded him silently, for there were no need for words—all had been arranged beforehand, and each knew the part they had to play.

The road, save for this group, appeared quite deserted, as far as the eye could reach, and the signal, low as it was given, was sufficient for the purpose, for, on looking over the thick hedge that separated the garden from the road, the forms of the ayah and her charge could be

perceived approaching up the path that led to the gap.

"Quick!" said the Count, in Marathi, to the elder of the two natives. "Quick! Get you through here," pointing to the gap, "and finish the job. I must go a short distance off, as the child knows me well, and I don't want her to see me."

The man addressed, without a word, was in a second on the other side of the hedge, and rapidly unfolding a large roll of cloth he held in his hand, and which proved to be a red saree, the outer and often the only garment of a Hindu girl, he laid it on the ground. Then taking from within the folds of his cummerbund a large silk handkerchief, he unfolded it so as to form a good thick bandage, and holding it loosely in his right hand, stood calmly awaiting the arrival of his victim.

Holding the hand of the ayah, to whom she was much attached, the little child came skipping along the path in high glee, for she had been told she would see some very big fish near the bridge, until she came to the spot where the stranger with the handkerchief was standing.

He stepped aside to let the couple pass, then, swift as lightning, taking the loose end of the silken band in his left hand, he flung it over the head of the child, completely covering her face by a dexterous jerk that showed him no novice. Then tightening the lower end over the mouth, he knotted it twice, and wrapping up the child in the saree, passed rapidly through the gap and handed his gagged and muffled bur-

den to his companion, who, already mounted, placed it in front of himself on the saddle, and made quietly off in the direction of Gwalior, presenting the appearance simply of a father journeying with his child in the manner of the country, and well wrapped up to preserve it from the chill evening air.

All this had only taken a few seconds, and no cry had escaped the child, so skilfully had it been done, to alarm the Count, standing a few yards away, and it was with a start of surprise, on hearing a horse's step, he turned round and saw the shrouded form of the Colonel's daughter borne away by one of his accomplices, and the other advancing towards him with a self-satisfied smile on his amiable countenance.

"Good," said the Count; "I see it is done so far. The rest you will carry out when and where you like, but see that you keep your word, or it will go ill with you."

"Sahib," replied the other, "before that sun rises again the little one will be dead, and your poor servant on his way to his native country."

"Very good. Here, then, are the five hundred rupees I promised you; so take them, and be off."

With a profound salaam the other took the bag, and after weighing it in his hand, hurriedly thrust it into a fold of his cummerbund, and without a word, mounted his horse and rode away in the direction taken by his companion.

The Count gazed after him for a few seconds, then turned towards the gap in the hedge, where the ayah stood awaiting his approach, muttering, however, to himself, "I suppose it will be all

right, and the old rascal will do as he says. I should have made him swear by Kalee or Bhowanee, or some of his goddesses; that might have frightened him. But as far as I can see, he must do it. He could never go about with an English child; that would betray him at once. No, no; it is all right, and after settling with the girl here, I will be off to play my part in the other little affair," and so saying he passed through the opening and approached the ayah.

"Here, Nannha, is what I said you should have if it all passed off quietly," handing her a small bag of money as he spoke. "You played your part well, and deserve what you have got. But what is that in your hand—a piece of missy's dress? What do you want with it? If you are seen with it, you may be suspected of something."

"You leave native woman alone, sahib, for that," replied the ayah. "Nannha got plenty cunning, and she make believe missy-baba fell in big pool, and went over rock, and get drowned, and this piece necessary for that."

"Well, do as you like, only don't get found out, that's all," answered his companion, moving off towards his horse, which, taking by the bridle, he sauntered along the Mall, until he met his syce at the spot he had appointed.

With this man he exchanged a few words in a low tone, then taking out a pocket-book, he hastily wrote a few lines on a scrap of paper, handed it to his servant, and mounting his horse, rode slowly away in the direction of Gwalior. He might not, perhaps, have been quite so easy in his mind if he had overheard a short conver-

sation between the two red turbaned men, now jogging along together some two miles in advance of their late employer.

"My father," said the younger of the two, addressing the other in the Marathi tongue, "what do you intend to do with the child here? I think there must be some great cause to make that sahib want her to die. If we could keep her, some day we might get a large sum to give her back to her people."

"My son, I have also thought of that, but it would be dangerous, I am afraid, and I promised to put the little one away—but I made no oath. He never asked me that, and the great Bhowanee could not be angry with her poor servant if he can make more rupees the other way. We must see what is best when we get to the house, so come along, as the sooner we get there the better," and touching his pony with the whip, an example followed by the other, they ambled swiftly on towards the old town of Gwalior. On reaching which, and after traversing several of the narrow, deserted streets, they turned into one still narrower, and passing under a ruinous gateway, were lost to sight after their entrance into what appeared to be a long gloomy passage, thoroughly concealed at its opening by a tangled mass of creepers and other plants.

The conduct of the ayah, when the Count had left, was equal to the occasion, and quite justified her boast of the cunning she possessed.

Taking up the doll and the child's hat, which had fallen off, she ran rapidly down the path until she reached the plateau by the big pool.

Casting a stealthy glance around, and satisfy-

ing herself she was unobserved, her first act was to hide her ill-gotten gains under a large stone, some little distance off the path, where no one was likely to tread. This done she returned to the plateau, and after throwing into the water the hat and doll, she waited until she had seen them carried by the current over the ledge into the smaller pool below, then taking in her teeth the piece of dress she had torn off, she plunged in, and a few strokes brought her to the cleft in the ridge of rock that separated them.

A practised swimmer, she easily avoided the direct force of the water, that would have carried her through the opening, and holding on to the rock by the left hand, she transferred the remnant of muslin from her mouth to her right, and throwing her head back, screamed again and again for help.

Her cries were heard, and in a very short time every man, woman, or child who dwelt in the Colonel's compound were on the spot and acquainted with the cause, for on being rescued from her apparently perilous condition, the ayah threw herself down on the ground, and in a well-acted paroxysm of grief gave them to understand that her charge had fallen into the water, and carried over into the deeper pool below, was drowned; that she had tried her best to save her, and jumping in, she had caught her by the dress, but the force of the current was too strong, they were carried to the opening, when the piece of cloth becoming detached, her hold was gone, and in a second the child had disappeared, and she only had escaped the same fate by luckily obtaining a grasp of the

rock, and her cries had brought them to the rescue.

This story, which bore truth on the face of it, created dire consternation, the women screamed, the children cried, while the men, headed by the old khansamah, proceeded to search the pool, with no result further than the finding of the hat and doll; and considering the case hopeless, and the child lying dead in one of the deep holes known to exist at that spot, in a mournful procession they all proceeded to the bungalow, followed by the dripping Nannha, trembling like an aspen leaf from cold and fear. As they neared the house a carriage drove up, and Mrs Carwithen, alighting at once, inquired the cause of the assemblage.

Twenty voices at once replied, in as many tones and keys.

"Oh, mem-sahib, mem-sahib, missy-baba dead."

The mother caught the words, gave a sound between a gasp and a sob, while every bit of colour left her face, and she seemed on the verge of falling.

Making, however, a strong effort, she recovered herself, and turning to the khansamah, asked him to tell her at once the truth.

He obeyed, and related all he knew, and then called on the ayah for her version, which she gave in the same words as when first drawn out of the water.

Her mistress listened in silence, making no comment; then turning to the group of servants, who still stood near, she cried,—

"One of you go at once and tell the

colonel-sahib to come home; you will find him on the racecourse. Tell him what has happened, and to make haste," continued she as one ran off to do her bidding.

Pressing her hand to her heart as if to stifle pain, the afflicted mother walked slowly towards the front entrance of the house, and was on the point of entering, when a man, a syce by his dress, held out to her a folded piece of paper.

Mechanically she took it, but glancing at its contents, her face changed, and with a stamp of her foot she exclaimed impatiently,—

"How insolent, after what I said this afternoon —and to say the bearer will tell me more. I will not demean myself by asking, and yet I must," and turning to the man, she said in Hindustani, "What did the sahib tell you to say to me?"

"He told his poor servant to say master could tell the mem-sahib about the child."

"The child—what child? What do you mean?" said his listener eagerly. "Did he mean my child, that is lost? When did he tell you this?"

"A few minutes ago," replied the man; "but I know nothing more than the words my master told me to say."

"There is some mystery about this affair, I feel certain," thought Mrs Carwithen. "I do not believe Nannha's story, and this confirms my suspicions, and that villain is at the bottom of it. Oh, my darling! my darling!" exclaimed she, "if you are living, and in that man's hands, he is capable, even if only to spite me, of any enormity. I must go at once and rescue you."

And without giving a thought to the reckless-

ness of her action, and without instructing anyone of the servants to tell her husband where she had gone, she ordered her horse to be saddled, and rapidly changing her dress for her riding-habit, was ready when it was brought round, and at a gallop she started off on the Agra road, and was soon lost in the distance.

"Well, well," said the old khansamah, who had been a witness of the scene, "I don't know what has come over the mem-sahib. Perhaps the loss of the little one has made her mad, or was it this bit of paper?" picking up the note that, in the hurry of departure, the recipient had let fall. "I cannot read English writing, so I will show it to the colonel-sahib," and so saying he tucked it away in a fold of his cummerbund, and entered the house to await his master's arrival.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE DÂK BUNGALOW.

TEN minutes had barely elapsed after the hasty departure of Mrs Carwithen when her husband rode into the compound, the messenger she sent having found him just on the point of leaving the racecourse for home, and the news imparted by the man caused him to quicken his pace. He was met on entering the house by the old khansamah, who acquainted him with what had taken place, and who, asking permission to fetch the ayah, soon reappeared with the only witness of the catastrophe.

The Colonel glanced at her as she entered, and then looked down on the ground as if in sorrowful thought, while Nannha related for the third time the mournful story of the child's death; but it ran much more glibly from her tongue in the presence of her master than when relating the same tale standing under the keen and searching glance of her mistress.

He heard her to the end, then turning on his

heel, walked into the other room, where he expected to find his wife.

"Grace, Grace," he cried, on finding the room empty, "where are you? I want you."

The khansamah, who had loitered on the verandah, came in on hearing his master call, and turning to him, the Colonel exclaimed excitedly,—

"Khoda, where is the mem-sahib, do you know?"

"I not know more than this, sahib; the mem-sahib came in from races, and we tell her about poor missy; she look very sad, and was going into bungalow to cry, me think, when syce came and gave her a chitty."

"What syce? Whose syce?" interrupted his master.

"That your servant does not know, sahib; but the mem-sahib she read it, then ask the man something, then she call for her horse and gallop away down the road to Gwalior."

"What on earth does all this mean?" said the Colonel. "Where can she have gone to? I would give a good deal to see that letter."

"That can master easy do, for mem-sahib she plenty hurry make, and drop the chitty, which old Khoda he pick up," drawing as he spoke the piece of paper from his cummerbund, and holding it out to the Colonel, who snatched it from his hand, rapidly unfolded, and glanced at its contents.

"'Meet me at the Dâk Bungalow. Bearer will tell you more. Yours devotedly, Luigi,'" repeated the Colonel to himself, while his face grew white even to the lips, and his powerful frame

shook with passion. "So this is the cause of your sudden flight, to meet your lover before you even know for certain whether your only child was alive or dead, your guilty love overpowering even maternal instinct. Why, a wild beast has more, and you a woman—a mother—and, God help me, my wife! It seems impossible, and I must be either mad or dreaming. And that scoundrel," continued he, the ashy paleness of his face changing to one of crimson, as the hot blood surged to his temples, until the veins stood out like cords beneath the skin. "The villain, I saw him this afternoon hovering about the carriage. If I had only then suspected what he was thinking of doing, his hand would never have traced these lines. It is too late to repair that mischief, but not to avenge it, and if I only get you in my grasp, I will crush you like a scorpion, or this vile letter, even if they hang me for it," dashing as he spoke the paper to the ground, and trampling it under foot as if it could feel some share of the vengeance he longed to wreak upon the writer.

He was suddenly recalled to himself by the voice of Khoda, who had been an amazed spectator of the scene, and the excitement of his usually cold and reserved master, saying that the captain-sahib was then entering the compound.

"The very man I want," cried the Colonel, drawing himself up to his full height, and making a mighty effort to conceal his emotion, and his late excitement, and in which he succeeded. For to the eyes of St Leger and his companion, Aylmer, their chief presented his usual appearance as he advanced to meet them.

"You are the very man I want," St Leger, exclaimed he hurriedly, returning their respectful salute. "You will have heard of the dreadful accident to poor Muriel, and I want you to search and try to find her body, while I go after my wife, who has gone by herself some way down the river, thinking that the stream may have carried the child that way." A flush of shame appearing beneath the bronze on his cheek at having to speak an untruth.

His hearers did, however, not notice that, as both exclaimed excitedly,—

"But it's not true! it can't be! Muriel's not drowned!"

"It is," replied their Colonel in a trembling voice, "too true. Nannha was with her, and tried her best to save her, but she was drawn through the cleft in that ridge of rock, and in my opinion you will find her not far from where she fell over, so get together some of the men, and search every hole and corner of the pool, as also lower down the river. I shall be back directly; but don't wait for me. And get torches, for it will be dark in no time now."

"Not an instant shall be lost, Colonel," said St Leger, and the two officers made off with hasty steps, the tears streaming down the face of the younger, as he thought of the fate of his dear little playfellow, who reminded him of the home he had so recently quitted, being just the age of his youngest and favourite sister.

The Colonel watched them until they had left the compound, then taking from a drawer a revolver, he put it into the breast pocket of his coat, and picking up the mutilated fragments of

the letter, which he carefully folded and deposited in the same place, he left the room, and calling for his horse, threw himself into the saddle, and galloped off in the direction taken by his wife.

With a good twenty minutes' start, Mrs Carwithen had reached the bungalow even before her husband had left in search of her. Drawing rein, and springing to the ground, she hurriedly ran up the steps of the verandah, and pushing open the door of the principal room in the building, found the man she had come to see calmly seated in a chair, smoking a cigarette.

"My child, my child! What have you done with my child?" exclaimed she as, with arms outstretched as if she expected then and there to find and clasp her to her bosom, she dashed into the room and glanced wildly round. Not finding what she hoped, her arms fell to her side, and advancing towards the man, who at her entrance had not moved his position, in a tone of passionate entreaty she said, "Count Corsi, where *is* my child? Give her to me! oh, give her back to me!"

"Child! Your child!" replied the person addressed, turning towards the agitated woman, quietly flicking off the burnt ash of his cigarette as he spoke. "How should I know anything about the child? I know nothing, except that my ruse has succeeded better than I hoped for," and with a low laugh the Count rose from his chair and attempted to take the hand of his visitor.

"Don't touch me!" cried Mrs Carwithen, retreating to the opposite side of the room, mur-

muring to herself, "Ruse, ruse, what does he mean?"

The sharp ears of the Count caught the words.

"I will answer that question," said he smiling. "You know, dear lady, all is fair in love or war, and as I was unable to touch the heart of the woman by what I said on the racecourse, to obtain this meeting I employed the art of stratagem, and working on the feelings of the mother, succeeded as you see."

"You coward!" cried his listener. Then after a pause she continued, as if a sudden thought had struck her, "But how did you know that Muriel had fallen into the river?"

For an instant the individual addressed seemed at a loss to answer, but his ready wit stood him here, as it had often before, in good stead, as in the most natural manner he replied,—

"That question is easily answered. I was passing by your bungalow on my way home, just as you returned from the races, and seeing you met by an excited crowd of servants, sent in my syce to ask the cause. He came back and told me the child was drowned. Thinking the opportunity too good to be lost, I pencilled the few words the man gave you, and told him what to say in addition, which had the effect I desired, for it brought you to me as fast as you could come, and gives me the chance of seeing you alone for a few minutes."

"You lie!" cried she, "you lie, and you know you do! Your tale is plausible enough, but it does not deceive me, although it may others; but

I cannot prove it false. Oh, what can I do—what can I do?" and her voice ended in a sob as she sank into a chair, covering her face with her hands.

For a few minutes she remained thus, her companion silently regarding her; but as she showed no signs of moving from the position, he approached silently, and taking hold of her hand, despite the resistance he encountered, exclaimed in well-feigned accents of sorrow,—

"My darling Grace, why do you say such things of me? And I so looked forward to this meeting, to tell you, as I have so often done in those sweet days past and gone, that I love you—love you so that I cannot live without you. You must—you shall be mine. But," he continued, throwing into his voice an accent of deep passionate entreaty, "you love me also, Grace? You cannot love that cold, proud man you call your husband. You cannot, I say, so leave him—leave him at once, and come to one who adores you."

There was nothing very new in this declaration, for similar words had been addressed by him to her before, who had taken them at their own value, as anyone else would overhearing the harangue, which lacked the depth and passion of the words of a true lover, while the sentences were evidently taken from some play the Count had seen in his youth.

But this time they produced an effect quite unexpected, for springing to her feet, and clenching her small hands, she stood before him like an avenging spirit, or as he termed it, when recalling the scene, like a perfect fury.

"Love! You dare speak to me of love! Have

you not persecuted me enough, and done me harm that can never be undone? Do you believe I cannot see the falsity of what you term your love for me? You coward! you cannot deceive a woman by set words and well-modulated voice. The accent of true from a false tale of love is very different. But why—why did you single me out as a victim? That I cannot make out."

"And never will," broke in the Count hastily. "But look here, Grace, even if you do not believe in my love, you must be mine now, for you have gone too far to draw back."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, just this; you are now compromised beyond all hope of redemption, as it will be known you met and were alone with me in this place for some time, and your husband will cast you off, so better accept my offer; and if he goes in for a divorce, why all the better for your scruples, as I will then marry you."

Grace listened in silence to this cool proposal, then drawing herself up haughtily, she answered in a voice trembling with indignation,—

"Marry you! I would die first. I loathe and detest you, not only for your unmanly persecution of a helpless woman, but for the cowardly act of striking her through her child. For I know, Count Corsi, deny it as you will, that you instigated her disappearance, and that you know where she is concealed. It must be some prompting from above that tells me this, for I feel as certain of its truth as that I am alive and miserable. I know I cannot prevail on you to tell me where my darling is, but the hour of reckoning is

not far off, and her father shall drag the secret from your lying lips."

"Words, words only, my dear lady," said the Count sneeringly; "the father will have enough to do with the mother, about that which concerns his honour, without troubling himself about anything else, and you never would get him to believe the story, or that I had any hand in the matter."

"You do not know my husband," said Mrs Carwithen proudly; "he would believe me before such a man as you. When I see him, I will tell the whole truth of our meeting here, and my suspicions, and then we shall see who is right."

"Well!" exclaimed her companion, who, hearing the sound of a horse galloping, had thrown open the door and looked out. "The opportunity has arrived sooner than either you or I expected, for here he comes himself, and at a pace that bodes no good. *Sapristi!* he must have got scent of our meeting somehow, and hopes to catch us. No use talking to an angry man, so I will be off. He has the strength of ten such men as myself, and is probably armed besides, so *sauve qui peut* is the order of the day, and my only chance," and without even a single word to the unfortunate woman he had done his best to ruin, the Count sprang on his horse and made off towards the city.

Left alone, Grace looked wildly out, and saw that he had spoken the truth.

"What can I do?—what can I do?" she uttered. "No use in my attempting to fly now; but how did he find out where I had gone to, as I told no one? Ah! that letter, have I got it safe? Good heavens! I remember now, I dropped it

as I mounted my horse, and he has found it. I am lost! I am lost!" and covering her face with her hands, she burst into a fit of passionate weeping.

The Count hoped to have escaped unseen, but in this he was doomed to disappointment, for the keen eye of the Colonel had caught sight of the horse and rider as they left the compound, and recognised "Gitana" and her owner at a glance.

Putting spurs to his horse, he dashed in pursuit, and the gay Count knew in an instant that nothing but the speed of his mare could save him.

Darting through the gateway of the new city, he found himself in the principal bazaar, at this hour filled with people, gossiping, buying, or selling, and where he thought he had a chance of being lost in the crowd.

Much to his surprise, he found, however, on leaving this thoroughfare, with its motley throng, that the Colonel was still following him, and was closer to his heels than he liked.

"Nothing for it now but to try Old Gwalior," muttered he between his clenched teeth. "Once over the open, I know of many a hiding-place, and will baffle you yet!" Increasing his speed, he flew past the palace of the Maharajah, and across the plain that divided the two cities, an example followed by his pursuer, who, however, now began to think that his prey might yet escape him, as his horse was not so fresh after the hasty gallop from Morar. Darkness, also, would soon be upon them, and he knew literally nothing of the streets and by-ways of the ruined city they were approaching. In this

the other possessed an advantage which he soon showed, for without a moment's hesitation he plunged into a side street, and after turning to the right, then to the left, several times over, as if to throw his pursuer off the scent, he came upon one even narrower than any he had as yet traversed, and in a few seconds halted before the ruinous gateway through which the two red turbaned men had passed with their unconscious burden a good hour before.

Giving a low whistle, he awaited a reply, but none came, and the delay nearly proved fatal, for the Colonel, now within range, had drawn the pistol from his pocket, and after a rapid aim had pulled the trigger. But to his astonishment and dismay, before even the sound of the report had died away, both the Count and horse had disappeared as if by magic, or as if the earth had swallowed them up.

"Missed the fellow!" cried the Colonel, cantering up and jumping to the ground, "distance too great; but where on earth has he got to? I see no opening out of this courtyard, but then it is now too dark to see much, and I must be off or I shall get lost in this deserted place, which looks as if no one had lived here for a hundred years. Let him go now, I know where to find him to-morrow, and we can then settle accounts," and after lingering a minute, peering about the place, but finding nothing, he swung himself into the saddle and rode slowly off the way he had come.

The place was, however, not so deserted as he thought, for all his movements had been carefully followed by the keen eye of an elderly

native, through a small window giving light to a room over the gateway.

This worthy chuckled to himself as the intruder left.

"Ah! ah! colonel-sahib, my master cleverer man than you. He knows this place, and the secret passage, and you do not, so you had no chance; but what," continued the man seriously, "what brought these two sahibs here together, and why did the colonel-sahib try to shoot the count-sahib? I cannot make that out; good thing for me I never answered his signal, so he thinks me gone, and the other won't come back. He would have given a good deal if he had come in and found *that*," casting as he spoke a hurried glance at what appeared to be a big bundle on the floor, but which was in reality the unfortunate Muriel, still gagged and bound, and to all appearance no longer living.

CHAPTER IX.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

THE sound of the door closing on the departure of the Count aroused Mrs Carwithen, who with a half-stifled cry made a step towards it, then paused and drew back.

She felt, instinctively, it would be of no avail to appeal once more to the feelings of her betrayer, or to leave the house and return home alone, and that nothing remained for her but to await the return of her husband in silent, voiceless suspense.

Walking up and down the room like some caged animal, at first an agony of fear took possession of her senses—fear for her own personal safety, for she was well aware of his passionate nature, concealed as it was under a cool, calm exterior.

Rarely, indeed, had he ever shown it, possessing great self-command; but she knew of its existence, and that some powerful cause could call it into life, and when once aroused it would be fearful, or even dangerous.

Of this she felt certain, and she feared the meet-

ing, for she felt that if the truth of her presence in the Dâk Bungalow would not be believed, a spark was found sufficiently great to fire the hidden volcano, as yet only suspected by the world. And it touched him on the point he held most dear, most sacred.

His honour! and the unhappy and frightened woman recalled with a shudder how many times she had heard him say that a wife who tarnished the honour and the name of a good man deserved to be shot like a mad dog, as an example and a preservative against any further danger to society at large.

Dread thoughts to ponder over, and they caused her brain to whirl, and her temples to throb and beat, as if a hundred hammers were at work upon her devoted head.

Soon a feeling of utter hopelessness came over her, and ceasing her hurried pacing to and fro, she sat down, and laying her head on the table, upon her closed arms, tried to reflect and wonder, to debate and argue as to what would be the ending of this most unfortunate affair.

She tried, and almost convinced herself that she feared no personal harm, knowing as she did the chivalrous nature of the distinguished soldier she called her husband, and the consideration he displayed towards women of all kind and condition. Finding some slight consolation in this, her reflections took a wider range, and she pondered over what she had better do and say, and also what should be done if her story was not believed.

Should she sit silent, and acquiesce in all the accusations certain to be brought against her, and accept her punishment meekly? Or should she

tell all fully, even to the minutest particular, and acknowledging her imprudence, throw herself upon his mercy, and beg for forgiveness ?

Never for one moment did the thought of exposure of her doings to the world, or separation from her husband, enter her head. She knew he would be angry, very angry at first, but felt that eventually he must believe her story, and things would go on as before, he treating her, perhaps, with more indifference than at present, and which, she thought, was deserved, for her recklessness, and which time would soften.

Strange to say, not one thought of her child ever entered her mind, save for one instant, when she almost longed for her husband to appear, so that no time might be lost in discovering the place where she was concealed, and bring her back. She never had believed in the story of her death, and now, after her interview with the person she felt certain was the abductor, her faith in her own conviction was strengthened, and she experienced no alarm on the subject, more a feeling of anger at the fright the poor child would sustain, through the wicked act of using her as a means to coerce the mother.

Her thoughts then reverted to the days before her marriage, and her heart grew a trifle lighter, and she even smiled faintly at the reminiscence of the small events in her then little world. For Grace Carwithen had had a happy childhood, youth, and maidenhood, both her parents having been good, kind people, if not very brilliant, and very proud of their only child's abilities. Her father was devoted to her, and indulgent to every whim and fancy, and never ceased expatiating on her beauty

and accomplishments to everyone he knew in the good town of Cheltenham, where the worthy officer had settled, with his family, on retirement from the army.

By these means his daughter became very well known, and very soon liked and appreciated, and being a tall, fine, pretty girl, with most winning manners, was immensely popular, and in great request at all festivities, no party being considered complete unless Gracie Royland was present.

She, on her side, was deeply attached to her father, and often congratulated herself on the fate that had given her such a one, and the pair were inseparable, until the sudden death by heart disease of the fond parent altered the whole tenor of her life. Almost heart-broken, she fully realised her loss, for her mother could not take his place, being only a commonplace woman, with a small mind, entirely given up to household cares, and although proud of her talents, took no interest in her daughter's pursuits, which she confessed she could not understand. Two such natures could hardly agree, and as the now straitened means of the family did not allow of the same life as before, Grace, after the first bitter grief had passed, avowed her intention of going out as a governess. To this no objection was raised by Mrs Royland, and very soon she found herself on the road to India, having, through the intervention of an old comrade of her father, procured an appointment in the family of a judge in the High Court at Calcutta. Proceeding to Simla, the first hot season of her stay in the country, with her charges, she there made the acquaintance of Ralph Carwithen, who proposed

to her, and very shortly afterwards they were married.

All these events passed through her memory as she now sat alone, and miserable, in the comfortless room of the dâk bungalow, each standing out like a vivid picture in her excited imagination.

They then changed, and she began to think of her husband, and of their early married life.

No smile was on her face now, for here she felt she had sinned—sinned, as many other women do, without any regret or sorrow, for in her heart of hearts she knew she had never loved her husband. She had been proud of his attentions at the time, and felt she liked him well enough to marry him, and so be able to quit her dependent position for one of freedom and ease, comforting herself with the idea that love would come in time. But it never had, in the true sense of the word.

She loved him in a way, and respected his slightest wish, and was a little in fear of him, but there had never been that true confidence, that blending of two souls, two natures, that form the happiness of married life, and now she had to confess to herself that her sin was bringing its own punishment.

She might have gone on for some time longer torturing herself with these reflections, and vain attempts to find some way out of her troubles, so hard and undeserved they seemed to be to her, innocent of all except great imprudence, had she not been disturbed by the native servant in charge of the bungalow bringing a light, for it was now quite dark. Depositing on the table

the smoking, ill-smelling wick, floating in a tumblerful of cocoa-nut oil, which did duty for a lamp, he withdrew as noiselessly as he had entered, and without a word, curiosity as to what was going on under the roof of the rest-house having no share in his thoughts.

He had scarcely quitted the room when the sound of a horse's step warned its occupant the moment was approaching, and in a few seconds her husband stood before her.

She had risen, and when he entered was standing resting one hand upon the table, looking eagerly towards the door, and with pale face and trembling lips, for she felt instinctively she had already forgotten what she meant to have said, in the nameless dread that now possessed her at his approach.

He looked very stern as he came in, with an angry expression on his dark face, which had changed greatly since she last saw him on the racecourse, although so short a time had elapsed. Its healthy fresh colour appeared to have faded, the cheeks were fallen and wrinkled, there were black patches under the eyes, which stared at her with a wild look, a look as it seemed to her of desperation, and she shuddered, as the thought of what he had expressed about faithless wives flashed upon her memory.

And his first act did not reassure her.

Striding into the room, he made towards the trembling woman, and laying the heavy weight of his strong hands upon her shoulders, pressed down with a fury he did not attempt to control, to force her to the ground, while in a voice hoarse with passion he cried,—

"Your paramour has escaped me for the time, but you shall not. Down, down on your knees, woman, confess your guilt, and ask your God to pardon you, for I never will."

With a sudden exertion of strength she freed herself, and grasping with both her hands his right arm, exclaimed in an agonised voice,—

"Ralph! Ralph! what would you do? Would you kill me? I am innocent, I am indeed."

"Innocent—pretty innocence!" replied the Colonel disdainfully. "We all know in India what an assignation in a dâk bungalow means, but don't be alarmed for yourself. I have no desire to kill, or even hurt you, as you think—a Carwithen never struck woman yet, and I am not going to be the first, despite the provocation, and my opinion that death is what all such women as you deserve; and even that fate is almost too good for you, for not only have you proved yourself to be a faithless wife, but an unnatural mother as well."

"No, no," cried his wife imploringly, "do not say *that*. You cannot believe it. Be as angry with me as you like for having come here, but do not believe I am what you say."

"What else can I believe? Was it not an unnatural act of a mother to leave her home before she knew for certain the fate of her only child, supposed to have been drowned? And for what purpose? To meet her lover, according to his own request, as you cannot deny, for I have the letter he wrote you this afternoon. You are found together at this place, for I saw him leave. One construction only can be put upon such acts and you can only be what I have termed you."

"It is not true," answered she, trying to speak calmly. "I know I have acted foolishly, and apparently wrongly, and that you have every reason to be angry with me, but it will be very dreadful for both of us if you do not believe what I say, for I will tell you all. I want you to know the worst I have done before you judge me."

The Colonel looked at her in some surprise as she said this, but listened attentively to all she told him of what had happened that afternoon on the racecourse, of her arrival at home, and of the interview with the Count. His face grew sterner and sterner as the tale proceeded, and the narrator, despite the encouragement she mentally addressed to herself, felt her heart sink, and her hope to be believed and pardoned growing fainter and fainter at every sentence.

Angry and bitter as he was already, it gave him even a stronger feeling of resentment against the woman before him in hearing her calmly and meekly relating, to extenuate her conduct, what to him could only appear to be a well-concocted story, a tissue of lies from beginning to end; and the consciousness of the calamity she had wrought was full upon him as he impatiently said,—

"And you expect me to believe all that, when I have what I consider conclusive proof to the contrary, and to try to screen your conduct under the plea of maternal solicitude by saying you came here to seek our child. Why, you are more wicked than I gave you credit for, in inventing such untruths, which you offer as your only defence. Do you take me for a fool, which I undoubtedly should be even if I believed a part

of it only—and that about poor Muriel is utter nonsense. What object could anyone have in harming the child, much less this Italian? and what object could Nannha, who loved her, have had in making up the story she told, and which bore truth in every sentence?"

"I know, I know," said his wife despondingly, "and it is just that that makes me so miserable, and so hard to clear myself. I saw by your face you did not believe me, and alas I have nothing more to offer as evidence to the truth of what I say. But listen, Ralph, a woman's wit, or her insight into things, or whatever you like to call it, is oftentimes keener than a man's, and I tell you solemnly that all I have told you is the truth, and Muriel is alive, and Count Corsi has taken her away, and that he has done this as well as persecute me, and brought me to this present pass to spite you for some cause or other. And his malice has been directed to wound you where you would feel it most, in the honour of your name, and in the affection you bear your child, and I have been made the victim to bring all this to pass. As I believe in a God, so do I know that this is so, and that one day you will be convinced of the truth of all I have said, and will confess that sinned against but not sinning have I been."

"That day will be far off, I think," said the Colonel incredulously; "but we have no time to argue that point. It is getting late, and we must be going back to Morar; but I want to tell you first what I have decided on doing. You cannot, I should think, for one moment imagine that I could ever condone your conduct

of to-day, or that I could again treat you as my wife? I forgave you after your return from the hills, where the scandal first began, and trusted to your honour in not renewing the acquaintance of that Italian, thinking your contrition sincere, and believing in your word that you had been guilty of nothing except reckless imprudence. You have betrayed my trust, and would do so again, so I must protect myself. A public exposure of what has taken place could do no good to either of us, and must be avoided; and although a legal divorce will not be pronounced between us, yet morally there will be one, as our separation will be complete and lasting. You will proceed to England by the next mail, on the plea of ill-health, and that is only natural after what has happened to poor Muriel, and can give rise to no comment. The eight hundred pounds I am to receive yearly under my father's will will be paid to you, as long as I live, by my agent in London, to whom you will address any communication you may wish to make, for I must decline either seeing or writing to you again. Henceforth you are as dead to me as if I had seen the earth close over your coffin.

"I cannot forget you. The events of to-day, and my dishonour, are too vividly stamped upon my mind; but your memory, little as I ever thought to have said it, will be hateful to me. If your mother was living, you might have gone to her; as it is, you must now choose your own home.

"I make no stipulation as to what name you may please to call yourself, and I have no legal

right to take away from you my own. I only ask that, if you continue to bear it, you will not dishonour it more than you have already done."

He ceased, and his wife's answer at first was only a look, but such a look of terror and dismay, that despite the assurance he felt that what he proposed to do was right, and even generous, it made him uncomfortable, and caused him to hurry towards the door as if to get ready for departure, and so avoid any further discussion.

"Stay!" she exclaimed at last, plaintively, catching her breath with a sound, half sob half moan. "You do not really mean that—you do not really mean that you cast me off utterly—now, at once, and without giving me any time to prove the truth of what I say?"

"I cannot see that any delay is needed, for you cannot disapprove that which I have seen myself to-day," replied he; "and further, I consider I act most justly by you, and far more leniently than many others would under the circumstances, and nothing now will alter my decision."

Then sighed she, "Since you choose to pursue this course towards me, dreadful as it is, I must abide by it, as I know I cannot alter your resolve; but I have one favour to ask, and a natural one, I think."

"What is it?"

"That when you find our child, you will restore her to me. In mercy's sake, hear me that one prayer! See, on my knees, I beg it. Not in shame do I kneel, for I am not guilty, although

you deem me so. I do not ask you to mitigate my hard sentence, but let me have our child—my child! She belongs far more to me than to you, for a mother has a greater claim than anyone else over her own offspring, for to her it owes its blood, its life, and no one can replace her. You yourself have a holy veneration for your mother, and her memory is a part of your life. For the sake of that memory, do not separate a mother from her child. Let me only have my child, and I can bear the rest."

"This is utter nonsense, Grace," replied the Colonel in a thick voice, for the mention of his mother had moved him deeply. "Poor dear Mury is in Heaven now, and even if she were living, I could not grant your request. Your argument is sound enough upon some points, but you forget that there are 'mothers and mothers.' I gave you my name, and you are undoubtedly the mother of my child, and there, with you, it apparently ended. But a mother's duty does not end with bringing a child into the world—it only commences, as it is her example, her teaching that makes the man, or woman, of that child. And what sort of a woman would Muriel have become if she had lived and been left to the teaching of such a one as you have proved to be?"

"Then you mean you refuse my petition?"

"Absolutely; under any circumstances, I should have to do so."

"Very well," wearily responded the unhappy woman, rising slowly to her feet, "since you do, I have nothing more to say. I must drag on

my weary life alone. But one day the dark cloud of suspicion and apparent guilt in which I am now environed will be rolled aside, and you will be sorry for what you have said and done this day. Take me home now, Ralph. Oh, take me home, for I feel as if I were going to die."

Her face had altered much during this interview. It now looked like the face of one grown suddenly many years older, and who had seen much sorrow.

He, too, had changed, and it would have been hard to say which of the two had felt the most, or would feel the results more bitterly in the future.

Leaving the room at her last word, the Colonel quickly returned, and half carrying half leading the almost insensible form of his wife, he placed her in the saddle; then mounting himself, and supporting with his arm the shrinking figure, the unhappy couple passed out into the darkness of the night, and the life that lay before them.

CHAPTER X.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

In olden days, when stage plays were long and the plot intricate, it was often necessary for the audience to imagine that a certain space of time had elapsed between the closing of one act and the commencement of another, the imagination being assisted by one of the performers called "The Chorus," who filled up the blank by relating such particulars as were supposed to have passed during the interval, so preparing the spectators for the altered condition of the characters of the piece when they next appeared.

And, although not necessary to enact his part so completely as was done in the good days of old, a modest imitation may very conveniently here find a place, and so shorten the space required for the development of our plot in a simple and easy manner. Imagine, therefore, that, from the close of the last chapter, "Ten Years" have elapsed since the occurrence of the events therein recorded, a space of time sufficient to work important changes in the lives

of men and women, and it will not, therefore, be surprising to find that, since we parted from our friends at Morar, we meet them again for the most part under altered circumstances.

Parting with Colonel Carwithen and his wife the last, let us begin by returning to them, and see how time has dealt with both.

The first care of the Colonel, on reaching home after the miserable ride from the Gwalior Dâk Bungalow, was to put the plan he had formed into execution at once, so anxious was he that nothing should be known of what had occurred, and that the true character of the separation he meditated from his wife should not appear to the world.

To save the honour of his name was everything to him, and that its lustre should not be dimmed by the known acts and deeds of a woman of the family, however wicked she had been, was his only thought.

For this he had, after the first wild moment of rage, striven to command his temper, and to act calmly and judicially, and had succeeded. For, recalling to mind what had passed in the interview at the dâk bungalow, he could only look upon it as commonplace.

The guilty one pleading for pardon and seeking to extenuate her fault, while he, the injured one, listened and answered quietly, and at times even compassionately. Not at all the interview he would have imagined could ever have taken place under such circumstances, with himself as chief actor, whose desire would rather have been to kill the destroyers of his happiness and honour,

and suffer any penalty after, so long as he had had his revenge.

So he had thought, but he was to find that circumstances alter cases, and that now, when fairly brought to bay in the position he had only thought of for others, his natural quick and sound judgment showed him that violence could do no good, and if he wished to prevent what was already bad enough from getting worse, he must, however difficult it might be, control his temper.

And he had done so, and was proud of the fact, and lost no time in finishing the work he had commenced so well.

With this view he, immediately on his return, sent for Doctor Westcott, the assistant surgeon of his regiment, upon whose discretion he knew he could rely, and without going into any details, much less even giving a hint of what lay nearest his heart at the time, he gave the Doctor an account of the part his wife had played in the search for the child, even so far as to ride to Gwalior, under the idea that it had been carried off to that city, winding up the story with the remark that he considered Mrs Carwithen in a very excited, nervous condition, and that, as the child was undoubtedly lost for ever, she would only get worse by remaining on the scene of the catastrophe.

That he was in favour of her immediate return to England, but of course he left it to him to decide when he had seen her. What he had said was only his idea.

The professional visit over, the Doctor sought his chief, and stated as his opinion that the sooner the patient left Morar the better, and as

she would in a couple of days or so be fit to travel, it would give time to catch the next mail, and if leave could be granted, he would be happy to act as escort to Bombay, as he supposed the General's inspection next week would interfere with his going himself with his wife.

As may be imagined, the Colonel jumped at the idea, and forthwith imparted to the miserable woman the arrangements made, and bade her be ready for departure on the third day from the present one.

Grace was ready at the appointed time, and as the dâk-gharry that was to convey her to Agra, the first stage of the journey, rolled into the compound, the Colonel, whom she had never seen since the time he had told her of her approaching departure, entered the room, and husband and wife saw each other again, and as he thought, for the last time.

The interview was brief, and the leave-taking still more so. Ralph Carwithen had felt for the last few days that he was acting a part, that his life was a living lie, and he knew relief could only be attained when this woman, the cause of it, and who still to the world was his cherished wife, should have passed from under his roof and out of his sight.

Consequently his words were few.

He briefly recapitulated the pecuniary and other arrangements made for her benefit, and handed her a letter to his agent, to prove her identity if required, and holding out his hand, wished her good-bye.

Grace took the letter with the remark that although it would not be put to the use he

intended, it might be necessary for other purposes; but as for her taking money from him for her support, she would sooner die first. And refusing the proffered hand, after a few last words, she passed out of the house, and stepping into the carriage was soon out of sight.

But not out of mind.

Those last words of hers were ever present in the thoughts of her husband.

"You have driven me forth, helpless and friendless, for I refuse your charity.

"Alone I will commence the world, strong in my innocence. And God, who is loving and just, will protect and assist me, until the time comes for what now is wrapped in utter darkness to be made light. Until then you will never hear of me, but when that day comes He in His mercy will bring us together again, and you will be sorry and ashamed of all you have said and done, and in your turn will sue for pity and pardon from the woman you said you loved, but have never trusted, and whom you have condemned to utter misery, and driven forth into the wide and heartless world, alone, desolate, and weary of life."

At first he did not attach much importance to what she had said, deeming her words due to her excited condition, and feeling certain that the time for reflection afforded by a long sea voyage would enable her to see things in a different light, and fall into the arrangements he had made.

But as time wore away this idea was dispelled.

The ship duly arrived at Southampton, Mrs Carwithen with it, and she landed and went straight on to London. But from that day to this, now ten

years, she had never been heard of again, despite all attempts to trace her; and the husband now believed his wife to be really dead, as he had given out two years after her disappearance, to allay the curiosity of her Indian acquaintances as to her prolonged stay at home.

And how had time dealt with Ralph Carwithen?

In appearance he had altered much. The upright figure was slightly bent at times, particularly when alone or unobserved. His hair and heavy moustache, once jet black, was now plentifully besprinkled with grey. There were deep lines on the forehead and around the eyes, which had lost their brightness, giving to the face a tired look, as of one who had known sorrow and concealed it.

And such was the case, for of his troubles he never spoke, and in manner was pretty much the same as when we last saw him, but colder and more reserved, with the addition of a pronounced disinclination to female society.

The gossips, notably the ladies, said it was all on account of the death of his wife, for whom he still secretly mourned. Others held the opinion that it was the loss of his only child in so tragic a manner that had affected him so deeply; and probably there was a little truth in both these ideas, although not quite correct.

For of his wife Ralph Carwithen rarely thought, much less grieved, but would wonder sometimes whether she was still alive, and if so, what she was doing.

For Muriel he had grieved as a fond father would, his grief being heightened by the awful circumstances attending her death, and the sor-

row he experienced at not being able to give the dear remains Christian burial, the body never having been recovered after the most complete and careful search.

Lapse of time had partially healed this wound, and he could think reverently of his child, as one who had gone before and was happy with the angels. It was rather the feeling of wounded pride that anyone so near to him could have proved faithless, joined to a species of resentment against the world and fate, for robbing him at one fell stroke of that life which he saw other men enjoying, happy in their wives and children—a life he could so well have appreciated. In worldly matters time had dealt bountifully with him; he had prospered, and was now at about the height of his ambition.

One of the frontier wars, in which he had been selected to command a brigade, had brought his name again prominently forward, and at the close of the operations his acting rank was confirmed, and as brigadier-general he was posted to Agra.

Having served the full time in his command he was promoted to major-general, and offered at the same time one of the prizes of the service in India, the post of agent-general for the Central Provinces.

This honour he accepted with alacrity, for it suited him exactly, enabling him to live a retired life at Indore, the seat of the Residency, where a small detachment of troops only were stationed, and but very few Europeans.

His tour of inspection through the provinces, in the cold season, would keep him employed, and he would derive as much amusement as he cared

for from society by meeting his countrymen at the stations he had occasion to pass through.

All turned out as he expected, and the five years he had held the appointment were quiet and peaceful, and he was perfectly happy in his own way; but although much liked, he was thought very retiring, or unsociable, as many said.

Of late he had fancied his health was not so good as he should like, and having now no particular ties in India, or elsewhere, he consulted his own taste in the matter, which took the form of a quiet rural life in the country of his birth, and he lost no time in carrying his desire into effect. Resigning the appointment he held, he made his preparations for departure to England, and was now at the present time, just ten years after his life was, as he said, blighted, on his last tour of inspection, and just about to leave Saugor, to march by easy stages to Jabalpur to take the train there for Bombay and home.

The third actor in the painful events occurring in the family of the Carwithens the day of the Morar race-meeting, Count Corsi, remains still to be accounted for, and that can be done in a very few words.

He had never been seen by anyone of his acquaintances in Morar since that day.

Judicious inquiries set on foot by Ralph Carwithen elicited the fact that the day following the scene in the dâk bungalow he had resigned his appointment in the rajah's army, and hurriedly quitted Gwalior, without leaving any trace behind him. No one had seen him since, and his name was soon forgotten.

Captain now Lieutenant-Colonel St Leger commanded the famous regiment, and one of the best and smartest of his officers was Dicky, now Captain Aylmer. To give the latter his due, he had never forgotten his early days in the regiment, nor the kindness he had experienced from its then colonel and his wife, whilst the memory of Muriel, his little sweetheart, as they used to call her, was ever fresh in his mind.

During the rest of the stay of his regiment in Morar after that fatal day, he made many a pilgrimage to the scene of accident, and pondered over the event, and how he had intended going to see her the next day, as he had told her mother on the racecourse.

Of Grace he never ceased talking and inquiring about her, and the Colonel answered his questions to the best of his ability, but never breathed a word of how matters stood to shake the boy's belief in one whom he considered, after his own mother, to be the most perfect of women, and when he was told of her death he mourned for her sincerely. He served as aide-de-camp to his colonel during the frontier war, and had distinguished himself so far, to his delight, as to have even been mentioned in dispatches, and to the time of his chief quitting military for civil life he had remained with him, and the closest friendship, or even affection, existed between the two.

Time had dealt leniently with him.

In appearance he was just the same, only more robust and manly-looking, ever the same gay, happy young fellow, whom his comrades still called Dicky, and ever likely to do so, he being one of those men one meets with sometimes to

whom a pet or a nickname ever seems peculiarly appropriate.

Doctor Westcott, now full surgeon, still remained with the regiment, and in medical charge since his promotion, but there were rumours of his shortly leaving it to take up the appointment of governor at the Lucknow Central Prison.

Of our other military friends, the old General had long since retired from the service, and was enjoying life at Cheltenham, that pleasant haven of rest for Anglo-Indians.

Major now Colonel Mercer still hung on to the army, with an eye to retiring on full allowances, and he was quite happy, posted to a good station, as a Doing-duty-Wallah, which meant for him an idle life, with little to do except to draw his pay.

Major O'Reilly and his friend Slater, of racing fame, were still well to the fore, and both still addicted to sporting adventures by flood or field.

Edwin Saunders, Esquire, M.P., had written the threatened book on Indian matters, published and circulated it, and was looked upon by his friends as a great authority on all transpiring in the Far East.

He was still a member of the House, waiting for a change of Government to give him the appointment, so he fondly hoped, of Secretary of State for India. Until that time arrived he attended to his duties as a statesman, and to his business as a shipowner and merchant, going out a good deal in society, both he and his wife, a bright, bustling, active woman, being great favourites in the London world. Of the

other Indian characters there remains now only the two servants, the ayah Nannha and the khansamah Khoda.

The latter remained with his master for some eight years after the catastrophe, when old age and infirmities obliged him to retire and betake himself to his native village, there to end his days in peace.

Nannha receiving notice to leave directly after the departure of Grace Carwithen, availed herself of it to quit the station, where she felt herself hardly safe from detection, and not forgetting the money she had hidden, was soon on her way to Calcutta, where she was lost to sight of any who knew her at Morar.

The good lawyer Lidgett was alive and well, and continued to correspond with his dear Master Ralph; while nurse Hannah, grown old, but far from feeble either mentally or bodily, had been now for many years in his service as housekeeper.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE MARBLE ROCKS.

EARLY morning at the commencement of the cold-weather season of 1878, the sun, with the aid of the morning breeze, was beginning to disperse the mists which yet hung over the valley of the Nerbuddah, and lingered in snowy wreaths around the summits of the hills, which enclosed this part of the vale and its broad and swiftly running river.

Rising in the Vindhya Mountains, the sacred stream flows, some two hundred miles from its source, past Jabalpur, and where we now behold it, some eighteen miles from that city, it suddenly narrows for about a mile and a half of its length, and runs silently between gigantic walls of white marble, the far-famed Marble Rocks.

A few hundred yards away from the entrance to the defile, and on an elevated plateau close to the water's edge, stands a small bungalow, one of the usual dâk bungalows of the country,

and at a short distance away a straggling, irregular collection of houses, a native village or gaum.

From the plateau a good view could be obtained of the rocks, as also the surrounding country, which for the most part was fairly under cultivation, and plentifully timbered with mango, tamarind, and other trees, affording a grateful shade to the inhabitants of the villages, which could be seen in the distance plentifully sprinkled about, and to their flocks and herds.

A fair scene at this hour, as the sun's rays glinted on the pure marble, and shining more broadly down upon the open country, lighted up the green patches of the various crops that covered the irrigated fields and gardens of the villagers, and the rich foliage of the trees, many covered with great creepers, now in full flower, and hanging down in graceful festoons, or clinging in dense masses to their tops.

Truly a fair sight, as seen in the cool, fresh morning air, and so evidently thought a young fellow, English by his appearance and dress, who, leaning over the railing of the verandah of the dâk bungalow, seemed wrapped in delighted contemplation of the scene before him. So absorbed was he that the approach of the khansamah of the bungalow passed unheeded, and it was not until that functionary lightly touched him on the shoulder that he roused from his reverie, and turning round, revealed the features of Dicky Aylmer, broader and stronger looking, but otherwise unaltered, as

when we first saw him at the mess of his regiment.

"Pardon your poor servant, sahib," said the intruder in English, "but a runner has just brought this letter for you from the city, and he wants to know if there is any reply for the brigade-major-sahib who sent it."

"Wait a moment," replied Aylmer, hastily opening the envelope, which contained a sealed letter.

"From my dear old Colonel!" he muttered to himself. I wonder what he is writing about, as I expected he would arrive at Jabalpur to-morrow.

"There is no answer, khansamah," continued he, after perusing the note, "but give this rupee to the man, and tell him to give my best salaam to the brigade-major-sahib."

The khansamah left with the message, and Aylmer, after carefully reading over the letter again, exclaimed,—

"What a bother for the General to be detained at Saugor. I am afraid he will miss his boat from Bombay, and I have only another ten days' leave. I think I had better take his advice and push on to the station and join him. If he has left, I must meet him on the road—great nuisance though, for I had hoped to have gone with him, and seen him safely on board.

"Yes, I'll get back to-night to Jabalpur, pack up a few things, and start off; the dâk bungalows are not bad on that road, and it will give me more time to be with the chief, as I perhaps may not see him again for some time.

It is a good five years since I have, and I hear he is ill, and much altered—never got over the deaths of wife and child, and I don't wonder at it.

"Ten minutes more," continued he, looking at his watch, "and then, I suppose, the old khansamah will be ready with the breakfast he promised me.

"Hope he won't be late, as I want to take a turn on the river to see the rocks before I leave; but, hulloa, what's that?" as a slight scream, proceeding from a thicket on the side of the plateau, arrested his attention.

"Sounds like a woman in distress. I'll be off to the rescue." So saying, Aylmer vaulted over the railing of the verandah, and running down the steep path, made for the direction of the sound.

He had not far to go, for on entering on the little track that ran through the coppice and conducted to the village, he soon descried the cause of the outcry. A young native girl stood in the centre of the roadway, with alarm depicted on her countenance, and apparently afraid either to advance or retire.

"What is the matter, little one?" cried Aylmer in Hindustani, as soon as he reached her—a proceeding that caused the girl to shrink further back, and to cover her face with a fold of her saree, over the top of which she peeped at her questioner.

His appearance evidently reassured her, for after a short pause she replied in the same language, but spoken in a way that showed it was not her usual tongue.

"I hardly know, sahib. I am very foolish, but coming down the path here I trod on something that moved, so I cried out, thinking it was a snake."

"And very likely, too," said Aylmer. "It looks a snaky sort of country round about here; no wonder you were frightened."

"But I ought not to have been, sahib. I am a country girl, and come here every day—have done so ever since I was a little child, and seen plenty of snakes which never harmed me. But I am in great trouble, and start and feel frightened at everything."

"Seems to be a case of nerves," thought her companion. "Did not know niggers had any. Thought all that only belonged to my fair countrywomen. Should like to comfort her all the same, for I know she is pretty, although I have only caught a glimpse of her face, which she covers up like a precious relic. I say, young lady," said he, addressing the girl, "do all the women of this part of the country keep their faces muffled up when they speak to people?"

"No, sahib; but you know it is our custom to cover the face on the approach of a strange man, particularly a sahib. But I have seen many, and talked to them also, and they were always good, and never hurt me in any way; so I have no wish to hide myself from one who speaks such kind words to a poor native girl," and so saying she dropped the fold of cloth and looked her interrogator full in the face.

"By Jove, what a beauty!" said Aylmer

to himself. "Wish I could paint like some of the fellows I know. Would make a picture of her, call it 'The Indian Princess,' and send it to the Academy. Should make a fortune."

And a pretty picture the girl made standing there in the sunlight, with a background of dark foliage and many-coloured flowers.

For although not exactly beautiful, for critics might have called the features irregular, they were soft and inexpressibly charming, and although soft, they were neither insipid nor betokening a weak character. Rather the reverse, for they appeared full of endurance and patience, and the same was reflected in the large brown eyes, which attracted attention at once, both from their beauty and from the strange look of dreamy languor in them, as if some hidden grief was lying at her heart, or some painful recollection called it forth; and yet her age hardly warranted the patient, care-enduring look which met you from one so young, for she could not have seen more than fifteen summers, if so many. The face was more European in character than usually seen in this part of the country, but which is not uncommon amongst the females of high caste, or those who belong to the more northern parts of India, and she was fair, very fair for her race.

Of a light brownish cast of colour, not the deep, rich olive you would expect to find, her complexion possessed that transparent softness which harmonised so well with the delicate yet decided features. A small head, full lips and mouth, which when opened disclosed pearly

teeth, unstained by any of the native compounds so usually employed, and to crown all, a mass of thick wavy hair, silken in texture, which, instead of being rolled up and confined, hung loose and flowing, reaching far below her waist.

Her figure was perfect even for a Hindu maiden, and every movement of her lithe form was well displayed by the soft, simple muslin saree, her only robe, which—of dark blue, with a patterned border of a lighter colour—wound round her body several times, formed a skirt, then passing over her left shoulder and head, constituted the only covering for the upper portion of her person, save and except the thin red silken bodice that covered her bosom.

It would have been difficult to say to what rank or station she belonged, for her dress was simple, and there was no mark of wealth about her save in the massive silver anklets and beautiful filigree earrings of the same metal which she wore as ornaments.

"I wonder who she is?" thought Aylmer, at length taking his eyes off the girl. "Can't be a purdah woman, or a child of some big swell about here, or she would not be alone like this; yet she looks a little lady, not like the native women we English are accustomed to see. I'll ask her, and hear what she says."

He was, however, spared the trouble, or perhaps the delightful task, for an intruder in the person of the old khansamah broke upon the scene and effectually destroyed the *tête-à-tête*.

"Oh! sahib, sahib," cried he directly he came near, "where you been all this long while, and your servant searching everywhere to tell you your breakfast ready long time and getting cold? I heard voices down this way, and thinking it might be the sahib, I run; but," said the old man rapidly, in another language, turning to the girl, "what are you doing here, Mooneea, so early, and what have you to say to the captain-sahib?

The words were in Marathi, and Aylmer knowing enough of that language to understand what had been said, came to the rescue of the girl, who, with eyes cast down, seemed troubled, and as briefly as possible told the old man the manner and reason of their meeting, which perfectly reassured him, for placing his hand affectionately on the shoulder of the girl, he asked,—

"And what brings you here so early, my dear child?"

"To see and talk with you, my dear old friend, my more than father, for I am in great sorrow, and I know not how to bear it, and it may be," said she, her bosom heaving with deep sobs, "the last time I may ever see you, for I am going away—going away to where I know not—and my heart is broken."

"I heard something of this, Mooneea," replied the old man, "and that your father was going back to his own country; but go on to the house and tell me the whole story. I will come to you as soon as I have given the sahib his breakfast."

The girl obeyed, and with an inclination of

her head towards Aylmer, as if bidding him farewell, ran swiftly down the path, and was soon lost to view of her two companions, who followed more leisurely.

"Khansamah," said Aylmer suddenly, "who and what is that girl?"

"That I can hardly tell you, sahib; I have known her from a little child, and she is, or said to be, the daughter, or rather granddaughter, although she calls him father, of a rich old man in the village down there, who calls himself a cloth merchant, but who is in reality a shroff or money lender. He came here some ten years ago, with his son and a little girl of some four or five years old, who was very ill with a fever at the time, and it was many months before we saw her. She was a strange little thing, did not seem to understand what you said to her, and could not make herself understood; for, although at least the age I tell you, sahib, she spoke no tongue, although she seemed at times to be trying to recollect words and talk.

"By little and little she learned the language of her relations, who are Mahrattas; and the Hindustani she talks now I taught her myself, for as a mere child she has been to see me every day, and I love her as if she were my own, and although the greatest delight of her life was to be noticed and spoken to by the sahibs and the mem-sahibs who came to see the rocks, yet not a word of English could I get her to learn, and I tried hard, and as you know, sahib, I understand your language well."

"That you do," said Aylmer, "better than any native I have met yet; but continue your story."

"There is very little to say, sahib. As I told you, she has from quite a little child come nearly every day to see me, and as she grew older I taught her to row the boat that the people use who come to see the rocks, and a better guide nobody could have, for she knows all the stories about them."

"Do you think she will take me after breakfast and point out all that is to be seen?" said Aylmer.

"I think so, sahib; anyhow, I will ask her. But here we are at the bungalow, and I won't keep the sahib waiting long, for he must be hungry, and if Mooneea says yes, the sahib can go when he is ready."

Breakfast over, Aylmer lit his pipe and waited on the verandah until the khansamah appeared, who told him that the girl was in great grief at the idea of quitting the scenes she loved so well, but she would take the sahib in the boat, as she would like for the last time to see again the places where her happiest days had been spent.

In another minute Mooneea stood before him, and without uttering a word led the way to the little jetty where the boat was moored, and signing to Aylmer to take his place in the stern, stepped in, and casting off the rope, a stroke or two of the oars, in her accustomed hand, soon brought them into mid-stream, and in a few minutes the Marble Rocks burst upon their view in all their magnificence. Too astonished to

speak, Aylmer gazed in silence upon the scene that unfolded itself before him. And it was a remarkable scene, for here the river, the sacred river, narrowing to the breadth of a small stream, flowed silently between gigantic walls of white marble, dazzling in their purity.

At some places the stone was richly veined with black wavy lines, and the greater part of its surface smooth and polished, particularly the lower portions, owing to the more recent action of the flowing river, and which had also fashioned these parts into strange shapes.

Huge boulders, some almost perfectly round, were scattered on a glistening strand of fine sand and pebbles, while other large masses were converted into arches by the water piercing through their centre. Gloomy looking caverns abounded, and before their entrances many curious forms of detached rocks lay in heaps.

Some large square pieces, piled on each other like an altar, were common, and from their regularity in shape and position it was difficult to realise that the hand of man had no share in carving and placing them.

Each of the various objects of interest in the course of the river, some mile and a half through the exquisite marble gorge, had its history or legend, and Aylmer listened in delighted silence to the sweet, low voice of his guide, who pointed out each place and told the story in connection with it; and he felt a pang of disappointment when, ceasing rowing, she in-

formed him that they had come to the end and must now return.

On the homeward journey Aylmer sat silent for some little time, then suddenly addressing his companion, said,—

"Your name is Mooneea, is it not?"

"Yes," replied she in a low voice.

"And a very pretty name, and perhaps you may not know, but it is the name they call those little birds, the little ones with the red bills, that our people make such pets of. But tell me, Mooneea, as you are no longer frightened of me, about yourself, and what is the great trouble you are in. Can I help you?"

"I am afraid not," said the girl sadly. "I know my dear old friend the khansamah at the bungalow told you who I was, and of my sorrow, but no one can help or console me, for I feel in leaving this place, where I have been in a measure happy, to go to an unknown country and never see any sahibs or mem-sahibs, or their little ones, the greatest pleasure I have, that I may as well die, for I have nothing to look forward to or live for."

"My dear girl," said Aylmer, "you are too young to take such a gloomy view of the future—wait a bit, until you get married and have a house of your own to look after."

"Married," said the girl scornfully, "if that was to be a release from my troubles, I could have taken it some time ago, for I am fifteen years old, and many have sought me.

"But I never would listen to one, for I know I could never make a wife to any countryman of mine; for I feel as if I were living two lives,

two different lives, and thoughts come into my head that I cannot account for.

"One life passes here, an everyday life; the other I dream, I suppose, but in dreams so real that I see and feel it all—a life passed amongst other people, not of my country but of yours, sahib—and I am happy then, but alas! I wake to find it only a dream.

"And the awakening is hard and cruel, for from the happy, joyous life that I seem to live amongst people who appear to love me and to understand my thoughts and feelings, I wake to find myself a poor Hindu girl, with nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for.

"Tell me, sahib, you are clever, and know these things, do you think people in this world can live two lives, or is it the evil spirits that put these ideas into my head?"

"No, I do not," replied Aylmer, "neither do I believe in evil spirits; fact is, Mooneea, you do not seem to be quite happy in your life, and you come down here, and see and talk to the English people, and you think about them, and then when you go to sleep you dream that they are with you."

"No, no, it is not that, but I cannot tell why it is so," said Mooneea sadly. "But I go away to-morrow a long way off, and although I shall never see the people who come here, your people, sahib, yet I know I shall have the same dreams, and feel the same as I do here."

"Where are you going?" asked Aylmer.

"I do not know the place," replied the girl. "It is somewhere in the ghâuts beyond Poonah, a long journey, and it will take time, as we go

by road, my father having some business at a village near Saugor, where he says we shall stay some days."

"Near Saugor," said her companion to himself, "that's funny—why, we may meet again. But I won't say anything about that, as I may not go, yet I think I shall," taking a look at the girl, who was steadily rowing. "I should like to know a little more about this child, and I could easily catch them up on the road, and we could all march together. Yes, I'll do it."

By this time they had reached the pier, and the girl jumped out of the boat, followed more leisurely by Aylmer, and were met by the old khansamah, who said,—

"Your father has been down to seek you, Mooneea, and did not seem pleased you were not here. So make haste home, like a good child."

"Yes, I will," said the girl; "but let me say farewell to the place I love so well first, and to you, who have been always so kind to poor Mooneea." And throwing herself into the old man's arms, she wept bitterly.

"Poor child! poor child!" said he, it is hard for both of us; but say good-bye to the sahib, and I will take you home."

Releasing herself from the old man's arms, Mooneea turned towards Aylmer, and in a low voice said,—

"May every good fortune attend you and yours. You have been kind to a poor girl, and made her last day at this place happier than it would have been, and I thank you. We

shall never meet again, but I shall never forget you," and seizing Aylmer's hand, she raised it to her forehead, then dropping it hastily, darted down the path, and in a second was lost to view.

CHAPTER XII.

A CONCLAVE OF THUGS.

THE swift feet of Mooneea soon brought her to the straggling village already noticed, at some little distance from the dâk bungalow, and decreasing her speed, walked at a slow pace through the narrow street until she arrived at a house, by far the finest and largest in the whole place, and which stood at least some fifty or sixty yards beyond the confines of the gaum, totally isolated, and in the centre of a fairish-sized compound. The house itself was of the usual type found in native villages, but larger, better built, and kept in a neatness that offered a strong contrast to its neighbours.

One storey in height, it was entered by a projecting porch, which conducted the visitor into the principal room, in the centre of the back wall of which was a door that led on to a verandah, upon which opened sleeping chambers and bathrooms, the kitchen and servants' quarters being situated behind in the compound, at some little distance away.

The room, with its cool floor of clay, decorated with designs in coloured chalk, was bare of furniture, as is usual in houses occupied by natives. Small woollen carpets, scattered about, with large pillows stuffed with cotton serving the purpose of chairs and sofas, being all that was to be seen.

In the centre of the room, in an expectant attitude, with face turned towards the door, stood a man—an old man, a Mahratta by his looks, as indeed he was, for he was the owner of the house—Hursooka, the grandfather of Mooneea.

Tall and powerfully made, with long arms, which even now, despite his age, were extremely muscular, and betokened unusual strength, he had a strong-featured, hard face, dark brown in complexion, prominent nose, with a high forehead, covered with deep wrinkles, a mouth that had hard, cruel lines about it, and eyes deep set under bushy eyebrows, restless and unsettled in character, yet bright and as piercing as an eagle's. None of the hair on his face was shaved, and large whiskers, beard, and moustaches of snowy whiteness, left little of it to be seen.

He carried himself uprightly, and it would have been difficult to tell his age exactly; for although with certain signs of old age about him, yet his frame betokened he was yet fit for any work that called forth strength and endurance, and he was so, although nearer seventy than sixty.

Plainly dressed, one would not have taken him for the richest man in the village, for a cotton-

quilted tunic, that covered his body, and a Hindu waistcloth or punja, tied tightly about him, and reaching barely to the knee, with ends rolled up, leaving legs and most parts of the thighs bare, constituted his only attire, save a small dark-red turban of coarse cloth, fitting tightly to the head.

Suddenly he started, and made a step forward, for his quick ear had detected a footstep, and in another instant the door opened, and Mooneea entered the room.

"My child, my child," said he, not angrily, but in a complaining tone, "where have you been all this time? You know ere this you should have been on your way to Nadgow, where you will stay the night with the wife of our good friend Dondee, and remain until we fetch you to-morrow, and Santoo has been ready a long time to accompany you."

"I know, I know," answered the girl wearily; "but I could not help it. I could not leave without saying farewell to the river, and the places I love so well, and I went; and then a sahib came and asked me to guide him to see the rocks, and as it was the last time I should ever do so, I dared not say no, and that kept me. But you are not angry with me, father?"

"No, no," replied the old man, "but I was impatient for your return, as I want my son back as soon after sunset as possible, to arrange with me the farewell feast I give to-night to all my old friends."

"I wish you would let me stay the last night in our old home, father; I would like to dream

once more of her whom I think must be my mother, for she comes so often to me when I am asleep, and I fear when I leave this place, where I have been ever since I was a little child, she will miss, and perhaps never find me again."

"It cannot be," replied he. "You know what a farewell feast is, and as they are all men, and a few among them rough and rude, it would not be proper for a young girl like you to be in the house. So, my dear child, go and get ready to start, and you will soon be rid of all these fancies when we reach our new home, and you have a husband to look after, and children of your own to care for and tend."

"I suppose so," said she in a plaintive voice; "and they are only fancies, as you say, but they seem to me to be so real, so very real, that I can hardly imagine that they are so; especially in the night, when I hear the voices that speak another language to our own, and see, as clear as I see the sun at noon, the face of a beautiful woman bending over me with loving fondness, and whom, I fancy, must be my mother, although she is not dark like our people. But tell me, father," continued she, eagerly turning towards him and grasping his hand, "why have I never seen my mother, and why do you never speak of her to me, tell me why?"

"Your mother, child," replied he in a low voice, and turning away his head so as to avoid the eager look of his questioner, "is dead—died soon after you were born, and my son, your father, whom you also do not remember, died some four years after, and I went and fetched

you, and brought you here when you were a little child, and ill with a bad fever."

"What was she like, my mother? Had she a white face like the mem-sahibs I see at the rocks?"

"Not exactly; but she was very fair, even for her country, right away up in the north, and it must be from her you got your colour, for your father was like myself a pure Mahratta."

The girl said not a word for a time, but seemed wrapped in thought. Then turning to the old man, she embraced him, and was about to leave the room, when suddenly falling on her knees before an image of the goddess Bhowanee, that occupied the place of honour in the room, she cried in an entreating tone,—

"Oh, Holy Mother—the mother that directs all things—take me to thyself; or if thou leavest me longer to drag on my weary life, let not my earthly mother forsake me—she, I mean, that comes in my dreams, and is so beautiful—so very beautiful—and whispers such words of comfort in my ears. Mother, Holy Mother, dost thou hear? I will do thy bidding in all things if thou willst do this one thing for me, and let her come to me—come to poor Mooneea, and lighten her sorrow. Do this, Blessed Mother, and I shall be content to live or die with thee, according to thy word."

A long silence followed, then she arose, and turning to her grandfather, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, said in trembling accents and with heaving bosom,—

"Father, I am calm now. The goddess has heard my prayer, and I am content to go and live in the other country where you are taking me to, for I shall have my dreams to comfort me. So forgive and bless your child, and send her on her way," and taking his hand, she kissed it affectionately, and hurriedly left the room; and in a very short time the sound of steps outside betokened her departure, accompanied by her uncle Santoo, the exact counterpart of his father, on a smaller scale, but with moustache and beard of raven blackness.

Left by himself, the old man sank down upon one of the mats which were scattered about the floor of the room, and resting well back against the pillow, he remained motionless, with eyes shut as if asleep, for the space of at least an hour.

Then he suddenly sprang to his feet, and his next proceeding was a curious one.

Passing out by the back door that opened on to the verandah, he went into every room in the house and examined it carefully, as if he suspected someone to be concealed in some part, then crossing the compound, he did the same in the kitchen and servants' quarters, and finally taking a good look all round, he re-entered the house, muttering to himself the while.

"I thought so. No one about. Could hardly be, as I sent away all the servants early this morning, and not a soul is likely to come near the place from the village. The day is getting on, and in a few hours it will be dark, and they are too busy getting their cattle home or

preparing the evening meal to interrupt me, so to work."

Divesting himself of his tunic, he stood naked to the waist, and then one could judge of the muscular development of his arms, and form an opinion that despite his age he was an extraordinarily vigorous man.

Taking up a spade that stood in a corner, he commenced in the very centre of the room to dig a hole, some three feet long by two in breadth, a task not so very difficult as the floor was simply clay for some depth, and the rest soft earth.

This, however, took him a good hour to effect; then collecting all the clay and earth that had been thrown out, he carried them into the compound and placed them cautiously in a heap, afterwards carefully sweeping out the room, then covering the hole, which had the appearance of a small grave, with two or three planks of wood, evidently prepared beforehand, which he fetched from the verandah, he spread over them the largest carpet that he could find, and lying down upon it, fatigued by his labour, was soon sound asleep. He must have slept for a good two hours or more, for when he was aroused by someone trying the door it was quite dark.

"Is that you, Dada?" cried he in a peculiar dialect, not Mahratti, his own tongue.

"Yes, Jemadar, it is I," said the intruder in the same language. "Open the door," which was immediately done, and a man venerable in appearance, and with a long flowing beard, entered the room, carrying with both hands some object

wrapped up in a clean white cloth, and which appeared to be much broader at one end than the other.

"Have you got it?" asked the owner of the house eagerly.

"Certainly," replied the other, "here it is, and made according to the sacred teaching. No other work have I done until I had finished that which was to me a labour of love. Here it is," continued he, holding out to the other the parcel he carried, "unsullied, untarnished, and no living thing has cast a shadow upon it."

"Good," replied his companion; "but let us place it in security, so that none shall fall upon it before the sacred rites are fulfilled. For if so, thou wouldst have thy work all over again, and our departure would perhaps be delayed until too late to carry out the plans I have formed, so let us place it here, good Dada," hastily removing the carpet, and then the boards over the hole he had made, as he spoke, "so that no evil can befall it."

The man obeyed, and reverently deposited his burden into the place prepared for it, and with the assistance of his companion replaced the planks and carpet as they were before being disturbed.

Extending his hands over the hidden object, Hursooka drawing himself up to his full height, and casting a look of defiance around the room, as if to say what I have here I will defend with my life, exclaimed in slow and measured tones,—

"Lie thou there, O Kodalee, no harm shall befall thee. I will watch over thee until the

time comes when thou shallst change thy character, and become a kussee, the sacred nisham of the devotees of the great and dread goddess, for although the roomal may be our ensign, thou art our standard.

"And now," continued he, turning towards the other, "Brother, thou canst go, but fail not to be here at the time appointed, which is now not far off.

"I shall not fail, O Jemadar," and with a salute of an inferior to a superior he quietly left the room.

An hour passed, and there was no sound to break the silence that reigned in the house, for its only occupant, save for his breathing, gave no sign of life as he lay stretched at full length on the carpet in the centre of the room.

Suddenly the door was slowly and quietly opened, and a man entered with noiseless tread.

"Father, art thou there?" said he.

"Is that my son Santoo who calls?" came a voice out of the darkness, the voice of Hursooka.

"It is, father, and I am back after fulfilling thy errand, and to know what further commands thou hast for thy son."

"Tell me of Mooneea," said his father anxiously; "is she safe with our good friends?"

"Safe and well, and anxiously looking forward for to-morrow to come, so that we may fetch her, for she has a loving heart, and does not like to be away from us."

"It is well," replied the old man; "now, my son, light the lamps and prepare the room for those I have bidden to come will soon be here,

so make ready, and then go and bathe and prepare thyself for the ordeal through which thou must pass. Tell me, Santoo, thou dost not shrink from it, for it is not too late to go back on thy word?"

"Never, never," replied the younger. "I shrink from nothing. I am your son, and like unto thee so I desire to be. I have not much to learn, as my teacher has been yourself, and I want no other teaching to do what lies before us in our holy work, but I want and must have the offices of the gooroo or spiritual preceptor, for the initiation and reception into the glorious fraternity, and that I am to have to-night, and I hail it with joy, for I have no fear, only faith."

"Spoken like my own son," said the father. "Now to prepare ourselves for the ceremonies of to-night, for we must be pure in body and mind, otherwise evil may befall us;" and taking his son affectionately by the arm he led him away.

In less than half-an-hour they were both back in the room, which was now lighted up by several oil lamps, placed in various niches in the walls made for that purpose.

"Shut the shutters close, Santoo," said the old man to his son. "I hear footsteps; our friends are approaching, and no intruder must witness that which will pass within these four walls to-night."

His son obeyed the order, and had scarcely completed his task, when a gentle tap at the door heralded the approach of the expected visitors.

"Come in," cried out the old man, and the door silently opened, and with noiseless tread walked in, one after the other, a body of men all dressed alike, and exactly as was their host and his son, in clean white cotton raiment, with legs and arms entirely bare, and round the waist of everyone was tied a large red roomal or handkerchief. Each as they entered raised his two hands to the forehead, and looking towards Hursooka, cried out in salutation, "Aulae Bhae Ram Ram—Peace be with thee friend," which showed they were all Hindus, and belonging to the fraternity of Thugs, and in the desultory conversation that followed their entrance for a short time, all spoke the same dialect that had been spoken between the master of the house and the bearer of the parcel now hidden beneath their feet.

None were young, in fact they all appeared, with one or two exceptions, to be old men approaching the age of their host, but all were quiet, respectable looking persons, neatly dressed, and carrying themselves uprightly when they walked, as if to show they had not lost all their strength, despite the summers they had seen; which was the case, for all were extremely muscular, betokening a temperate life and regular exercise.

At a signal from Hursooka, who appeared to be not only their host, but a leader held in high respect, all squatted down on the rugs or bare floor, leaving him only standing.

"Are all whom I have bidden to be present here to-night?" said he after a short pause.

"I think so, Jemadar," said the old man,

Dada, "but I have the list of names, as I carried out your orders, and went to each man's house separately and bade him come, so I will just look over it and see who is here, for I know everyone."

This he soon did, for looking at the list of names, which he produced from his waistcloth, he checked off everyone upon it, they sitting motionless as statues during the operation.

"All present, Jemadar," said he at length. "Twelve in number, and yourself and son make fourteen—not a big band, but a good and efficient one, made up only of good and true men."

"That I believe," replied Hursooka; "and now, brothers," continued he, turning towards the group, "I pray you give attention to what I am going to say, and if you find my words fair, and the plan I have formed a good one also, then say so, and give me your assistance to carry it out."

"Good, good!" came from every lip in a low tone.

"It will be the last time I shall ever speak to you assembled together, for you all know I leave this place to go to my own country, and many of you are doing likewise, and my heart is heavy, for it is a breaking up of old ties, and the dispersion of the remnant of what was one of the finest bands that ever carried out the behests of Bhowanee, our sacred patroness and goddess, first under my father, then under myself as Jemadar, being early appointed to the post of leader, for I had been well taught, had means at my command, was wise for my age, strong and resolute, and whose ancestors had been Thugs for many generations; and," continued he proudly, "I do not think the band suf-

fered in my hands, for success was nearly always on our side, until the time came when, hunted from place to place like wild beasts by the usurpers of our country, it became almost impossible to keep a band together, and little by little acts of Thuggee became rare, and the proud English boasted more than thirty years ago that they had stamped it out throughout Hindustan.

"But Thuggee can never die, it sleepeth only, for that which is capable of enthralling the minds of men, who leave everything they hold most dear to follow the sacred duty, shutting their eyes to risks and perils they must endure, cannot become extinct. Thousands have died for it, and thousands are still ready and willing so to do.

"And they who reverence ancient descent, and a long line of ancestors, must reverence the members of the fraternity, for they date from remote antiquity, and the profession, which has been handed down to us from ages, becomes the fate of those who are called upon to follow it, whether they be Hindus or Mohammedans, for none can avoid it.

"And nowhere can such true faith be found as exists amongst us, all animated by the same zeal, to fulfil the commands of the goddess who, with her own hands, instructed the first created Thugs how to employ the roomal, then sent them forth to kill all others not of their persuasion, allowing them to take for their own use all the property belonging to those they slew.

"Go where you will, we are the same, our hearts are the same, and we know each other by our signs of recognition, and by our peculiar

dialect, the sacred Ramasee, spoken and understood by all members of the fraternity, but by no others.

"Surely such an institution as ours must have been called forth and protected by a Supreme Power, and no doubt would have been still if all had obeyed the sacred traditions handed down to us.

"But we have not done so, neglecting omens and disregarding the restrictions assigned to us in our duties, angered our goddess, who withdrew a large part of her protection from us, and dissensions arising in bands, they fell apart and were easily hunted down by the English police and spies, until no security existed, except in a few states under our own native rulers, and even there, of late years, it has become both difficult and dangerous to follow our work.

"So, my brothers, Thuggee is almost a thing of the past, and can never be revived to attain its former glory; but, as I said at first, it only sleepeth, and I, with your help, or with only the help of those willing, for I force no man, am going to make a last attempt, with the remains of my once numerous band, and revive, even if only for a few days, our sacred work, and taste of the delights we enjoyed in its performance in former times."

He paused, and all his hearers looked at each other, but none broke the silence.

"Now listen to what I have planned, and to those who follow their old leader to certain success, for age has not lessened my cunning, it means wealth—wealth enough to each to enable him to end his days in comfort, for I shall only claim an

equal share with the others, and the booty will be one lakh of rupees, if not more."

A delighted hum followed these words, and the old man Dada said in an eager voice,—

"Tell us, O Jemadar, who and what are the travellers who are to be put away?"

"They are," replied Hursooka, "two brothers, elderly men, and rich goldsmiths and jewellers of Delhi, who are on their way to Indore with jewels to show the maharajah, and they have money with them also, for so they said. I have known them for many years, and have done business with them, and when I was in Delhi some ten days ago they told me this, and I have kept a careful watch on their movements. They arrived in Jabalpur yesterday, and start to-morrow, attended by two servants. They said they should come to see me, and halt for their meal at my house, so my plan is to wait for them here, and have everything ready for my own departure; and as they know I am leaving for my country, they will not be astonished but delighted if I offer to accompany them, our roads being for a certain distance the same. The rest, then, will be easy, as they have every confidence in me, and know me only as Hursooka the cloth merchant, and they can have no suspicion that under that name and calling is concealed the identity of Madhajee the famous Thug leader, who now calls on his old comrades to follow him once more. What say you, friends? Are you ready and willing?"

"We are, we are," came from every throat as they sprang to their feet, and lifting both hands up to their forehead, they bowed reverently before their leader in token of their willingness and fealty.

"What I expected," said Hursooka exultingly; "now to prepare for the great work. Our good friend and preceptor Bukshee, despite the many years he carries, is here, and ready to do his part, so let the Sacred Rites commence, and then we will see what the omens predict as to our success or failure."

CHAPTER XIII.

SACRED RITES.

"I AM ready," said a gentle voice, and from out of the group of the excited listeners of their leader's harangue stepped forth a venerable looking man, evidently of great age, as indeed was the case, for Bukshee had acted as gooroo to the band in the time of Hursooka's father, and had been the spiritual preceptor of that worthy himself.

Lifting his right arm to enjoin silence, he approached Hursooka, and asked,—

"Is that prepared which is to be made holy?"

"It is," answered he, and stooping down he rolled up the carpet in the centre of the room, and removing the boards that covered the pit, he lifted out the parcel that it contained, and taking off its covering of cloth, he held aloft a small pickaxe, bright and new as if fresh from the maker's hands.

Placing it carefully on a large dish made of

brass, he handed his burden reverently to the gooroo, who had now sat down with his face turned towards the west. He in his turn taking up the axe from off the dish, gave it to two of the band, who stood up and came forward for the purpose at a sign from their leader. Holding it over the pit, the officiating priest, taking water from an earthen jar that had been placed before him, carefully washed the tool, and then poured over it a mixture of sugar and water, then milk, and lastly, from out a curiously-shaped cup, a quantity of arrack, taking every precaution all the time that every drop of the various liquids should flow into the pit and not be spilled on its sides.

His next proceeding was to mark the axe from head to point with seven spots of red paint, and then taking it from its holders, he placed it again upon the dish, which now contained, in addition, a cocoa-nut, cloves, pān leaves, various other spices and scented wood, and a considerable quantity of sugar.

A fire of wood was now kindled by one of the men, and everything on the dish, excepting the axe and the cocoa-nut, which were removed by the gooroo, were thrown into it. Watching the fire intently, he waited until the flames blazed high and bright, then clutching the axe in both hands tightly, he passed it through them seven times.

Then taking up the cocoa-nut, he took off its rough outer coat, and placing the fruit on the ground, he took up the axe by the handle, crying out in a loud voice to the assembled Thugs,

who had witnessed all the proceedings in solemn silence,—

"Shall I strike?"

"Yes, yes," replied they all in one breath.

Whirling the implement round his head with a dexterity that told of long practice, he struck the nut with full force, and shivered it into fragments, then wrapping up the axe in a clean white cloth, he placed it on the ground, pointing to the west.

Turning his face towards the same quarter, an example followed by everyone present, after a few minutes spent in silent prayer, the gooroo exclaimed in impressive tones,—

"O axe! no longer a kodalee but a kussee, a sacred weapon, and our standard, we worship thee, we adore thee. Be gracious to us, O kussee, whose sound is never heard when digging the grave of those whom the goddess bids us destroy, and aid us in our enterprise, pointing out to us which path to follow to ensure success. On the march thou shallst be carried by none except a true and tried servant of the dread Bhowanee, and when at rest, no human foot shall tread the ground beneath which you repose, nor shall the touch of any unclean man or other thing ever pollute your purity."

He paused, and a dead silence reigned in the room, until broken by the voice of the master of the house, who exclaimed in a loud voice,—

"Powerful and mighty goddess, who hast for ages vouchsafed thy protection unto thy votaries, we beseech thee aid us and fulfil our desires. We follow thy blessed precepts, and

the rules which have guided thy disciples for ages. No manifestation of thy displeasure have we ever incurred when we were young, and now that we are old, thy aid and protection is doubly needful, so forsake us not, dread mother, but listen to our prayer, so that we may for ever love thee, and bless thy holy name."

Covering his face with his hands, the speaker stopped, and remained silent for some time, as if praying to himself, then removing them, he turned towards his companions and said,—

"Friends, there is yet another rite to perform. Art thou content to receive my son as a Thug and a brother?"

"We are," replied everyone present.

"Stand forth, Santoo," continued he, a command instantly obeyed, and taking his son by the hand, he led him towards the gooroo, who stood up to receive him.

"Brother and priest of the protector of Thuggee, I bring you a new disciple for initiation and inauguration into the sacred fraternity. All present are willing to receive him as a comrade, and he also is willing and prepared to take the oath, so, I pray you, fulfil your sacred office."

"Santoo, son of Madhajee Jemadar, art thou willing to be received into the fraternity, and become one of us?" asked the old man, looking his disciple full in the face.

"I am," replied he.

"Son, how dost thou feel? Is your heart firm, and your head cool? Tremblest thou not?"

"My heart is firm, my blood is cool, and I

tremble not, for why should I," replied Santoo proudly, "son of a Thug, and taught by my father your language, your laws, your methods of proceeding. I am yours to the death, and only wait for my reception into the glorious brotherhood to pray that an opportunity may soon be given me to show the teaching I have received has not been thrown away."

"Good, give me your hand," which taking, his questioner turned towards the west, and in a low voice exclaimed,—

"O Bhowanee, mother of the universe, if it seemeth to thee fit to receive this thy servant as one of thy votaries, vouchsafing to him the protection thou affordest to the humblest who obey your commands, grant us, I pray you, an omen which may betoken your assent or displeasure."

Silence followed this prayer, and all listened with eager interest to hear if it would be answered or not, and if so, whether favourably or otherwise.

A considerable time elapsed, when suddenly the hooting of an owl was heard, and at no great distance from the house.

"The goddess accepts him," cried out everyone in a delighted tone, while his father advanced towards the disciple with a beaming face.

"Be happy, my son, the omen is most favourable, you are accepted, and now must take the oath of allegiance, and partake of the sacred goor, and then thou art a Thug indeed, for let any man once taste of that, his nature will be changed and he cannot for-

sake us though he have all the wealth in the world.

"It is so," said the gooroo, "so come hither, my son, take this pickaxe, the holy symbol of our profession, in your right hand. Now raise it as high as your breast, and your left hand into the air, and repeat after me what I shall say, sentence by sentence.

"I, Santoo, son of Madhajee, do swear on this the sacred axe, which I now hold in my hand, to be faithful, brave, and secret, and to pursue to the death every human being whom chance or cunning may throw into my way, save and except those sects or persons who, by the laws of our fraternity, are held sacred, and whose sacrifice would not be acceptable to our patroness, whose power and aid I recognise, and pray for in every act of my new life. Should I fail in my duty, or offend in any way against the divine rules of the brotherhood of Thugs, may my face become black and my head be turned round until my eyes stand over my back, and I die the death decreed by the dread Bhowanee for perjurers and all who disobey her commands."

A solemn silence prevailed in the room whilst the gooroo spoke these words, which were faithfully repeated by the new disciple in a firm voice, and when he had ceased, all present hastened forward to offer their congratulations on the fortunate issue of the ceremony, the father being the first to embrace his son and hail him as a comrade.

"Bring now the goor," cried Hursooka, and one of the number handed to him, on a brass dish, a large pile of the consecrated coarse sugar, which

he took and gave to the priest, who, after sprinkling a few drops of water on the mass, took pieces of the sugar and presented them to each of the assembled party in succession, who ate it in silent reverence, all remaining for some little time with head bent down in meditation or prayer after it had been swallowed.

The silence was broken by the gooroo, who, rising up suddenly, said to the newly made Thug,—

"There is yet one more ceremony for you to go through, and which must not be forgotten; give me your roomal."

Santoo slowly undid the large red handkerchief which served him like the others for a waistband, and handed it to him without a word.

The old man took it from him, and turning towards the west, tied a knot in one end of it, inserting therein a rupee, then gave it back, saying at the same time,—

"Receive this roomal, a now sacred weapon; put your entire trust in it, and in the holy name of Bhowanee I bid it do your will. And now show that you know how to use it; try on me, but be careful, for I am old and feeble."

Taking the cloth and holding the knot in his left hand, he drew the plain end through his right until about length enough remained to encircle a man's neck, then grasping either extremity firmly, he silently approached the gooroo from behind, and dexterously throwing it over his head he tightened his hold, and in a second it was firmly round the neck of the old man, only needing the skilful wrench to either side to cause immediate death.

"That will do, Santoo," said he smiling, after the deadly necklace had been removed. "I see you have been well taught, and will be a credit to your father and all of us when you get an opportunity to try your skill. Now for the concluding part of the ceremonies of to-night, the invocation for success, and the awaiting of the omens. Madhajee Jemadar, as leader of the expedition, I bid you perform this rite.

Stepping forward a few paces, so as to stand in full view of the whole band, their leader obeyed the summons, and holding in his right hand a lotah or brass vessel filled with water, and in his left the pickaxe, which he held pressed against his breast, he turned towards the direction to be taken to-morrow when they commenced the journey, and in a solemn voice cried out,—

"Great goddess! Universal mother! If this, our meditated expedition, be good in thy sight, vouchsafe unto us help and the signs of approbation. Give us, we pray thee, within the time as ordained by thyself, if it pleases thee, The Pilhaoo, the voice of an omen-endowed animal on the left hand, and if favourable, we beseech thee to let it be followed by The Thibaoo, that on the right, so that we may know surely that no evil is likely to befall us."

He paused, and appeared to be lost in seeming abstraction. No one spoke, but on the faces of all the band was depicted the impatience they felt for the omens. They scarcely breathed, so intensely anxious was the suspense.

The thirty minutes, the allotted span of time, had nearly run out, when suddenly the call of a jackal was heard on the left.

All faces grew more serious, if possible, for they knew that the call of one only, on that side, was evil, and it would have to be followed by that of another, on the right, to make it a good omen.

They were, however, not left long in suspense, for the shrill cry had hardly died away when it was answered by a similar one on the right hand.

"Jey Bhowanee! Victory to Bhowanee!" cried out everyone. "The omen is most favourable! Jey Bhowanee! Jey Bhowanee!"

When the clamour had subsided, their leader exclaimed,—

"Brothers, the omen is all which we could desire; rarely have I heard a more favourable one. Success attends us, of that we are sure. Let us now eat, for we are hungry, and it is growing late, and I have yet a few words to say to you before we part. Go, then, Santoo and Dada, and bring that which has been prepared for the feast. It is all ready, for it has been cooked, while we were engaged in our ceremonies, by one I can trust."

The men obeyed, and in a short time the large clean white cloth, which had been spread on the floor, was covered with piles of smoking rice, dāl, curries of vegetables and fish, and hot cakes, flanked by large jars of milk, arrack, and country spirit to wash it down.

All took their places, and for some time no sound was heard save the noise occasioned by

a lot of hungry men eating as fast as they could, and only breaking off in that exercise to take a long pull at one of the jars, according to their taste.

When hunger had been appeased and the cloth swept nearly bare of everything, Hursooka arose, and turning towards his guests, said in a low voice,—

"Friends, I will not detain you long, but I have to give you a few directions as to our proceedings.

"You know we must not all travel the road together, that would create suspicion; so listen to what I have planned, and when you start, follow my directions carefully or harm will befall us.

"We are fourteen in number. Santoo, Dada, and Bodhoo will accompany myself and my two friends. The rest of the band will be divided into two parts. Four of you will go with Bukshee, who will be your leader, and the other four with Dondee, and see you obey any directions they may give, for they will be as if from myself. Disguise yourselves carefully, and show not the roomal. Be cautious in all things, and be not too far apart, or from my party, nor omit not the usual signs if danger threatens. I shall follow last, and when I require you to give my final instructions I know how to find you, and how to summons you.

"You can all depart now, for you need rest, and you must be early on your way. May Bhowanee protect you until we meet again."

He ceased, and one by one all the band, after a deferential inclination of the head towards their leader, filed out as silently and noiselessly as they had entered, and father and son were left alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LAST ATTEMPT.

It was broad daylight, and the sun was rising in all its glory, among gorgeous golden clouds, before the two inmates of the room, in which the exciting scenes of the night had taken place, awoke from the heavy sleep into which they had fallen soon after the departure of their comrades.

The elder was the first to open his eyes, and on rising from the mat that served him as a bed, seeing how far the morning had advanced, made haste to awaken the other.

"Santoo, Santoo," cried he in a loud voice, "wake up, my son, it is late, and we have much to do before the arrival of our guests; so hurry and fetch me that black box you know of, and then aid me to fill up this hole in the floor, and make it as it was before."

Santoo, on hearing the voice of his father, sprang from his couch, and leaving the room, shortly returned with a small box of curious native work, and which did not appear to be very heavy.

Taking it from the hands of his son, Hursooka placed the box, which he first wrapped carefully up in a piece of stout cloth, in the centre of the pit, then turning towards him said in an impressive tone,—

"My son, you know, and you only, what that box contains, and where it will be hidden; speak never of it to any person, and never remove it, even if anything happens to me on this journey and you escape, unless that which I have told you of has come to pass."

"I promise, father; and now I will go and fetch the earth, and fill up the place, and plaster the whole floor of the room with wet clay, which will soon dry, and no one will ever know that it has been disturbed."

He was as good as his word, and in an hour's time the clay had hardened, and it would have been difficult to have found out any difference in any part of the floor. Each then busied himself in making their preparations for the journey, and for the incoming of the new proprietor of the house, and this completed they sat patiently down to await the arrival of their fellow-travellers.

They had not long to wait, for about the time when the sun had attained its height in the heavens, that told that it wanted two hours off midday, the clatter of hoofs announced the approach of the brothers, each riding a small wiry pony, and followed on foot by two ordinary looking natives, evidently servants.

Both were elderly men, but fine looking, and dressed in the manner affected by the Delhi tradesmen; but their clothes were of a superior

quality of cloth, and that and their general appearance denoted they belonged to the opulent classes in that city.

"Greeting, friends," exclaimed Hursooka, who had come out to meet them.

"The same to you, good friend," replied the two in a breath.

"I pray you dismount and enter my poor house," continued he, "for you must be weary; it is a long ride from Jabalpur. Come and eat the morning meal, and then rest, and when you are refreshed we will start on our way; but there is no hurry, for Nadgow, where there is a good serai, is not far off, and I propose to halt there for the night."

"As you will, friend; we leave everything to you, the leader of our party, and we think it very good of you to take so much trouble for two old men; and you know the road and we do not, so we are fortunate in every way," exclaimed the elder of the two, and so saying they all entered the house.

It was fully three o'clock in the afternoon before any signs of departure could be observed, but at that hour a stir within the house announced its coming, and in a few minutes the party set out on their way to the village, some nine miles away, Hursooka on a strongly built pony, riding by the side of the strangers, and followed closely by Santoo and the two other Thugs, who were disguised as servants.

It was nearly five when they reached their destination, and coming in sight of the house of Dondee, to whose family the care of Mooneea had been confided the evening before, Hursooka

suddenly started and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

And it was not uncalled for.

There, in front of the roof that had sheltered her the night before, stood the girl herself, in animated conversation with a tall young man, not of her kith or kin, but undeniably English in appearance and dress.

And it had happened thus.

Aylmer, leaving Jabalpur early that morning, had been informed by the khansamah at the Marble Rocks, where he halted for breakfast, that the party had not set out as yet, with the exception of Mooneea, who had been sent on to await their arrival at Nadgow.

This piece of news decided the hearer to push on at once, as he saw how much easier it would be to form the acquaintance of the girl's relatives if they met him in her company; and, besides, being before them on the road, it would not look as if he had followed for the purpose he had in view.

His fast-trotting pony soon carried him along the road, followed more leisurely by his servant, and to his great delight the first person he saw on entering the village was the girl he wanted to find, and whose face lighted up at his approach.

"Why, child," said he, dismounting as he spoke, "what are you doing here by yourself? I thought, as you told me yesterday, you would be with your father, and miles on your journey."

"So I should have been, sahib, but last night my father gave a farewell feast to his friends,

and sent me on here to be out of the way, but I expect him now at any minute, for it is time they should be here to fetch me, as my uncle promised when he left."

"He cannot be here for some time," said Aylmer, "for I came straight on here from the rocks, and I passed no travellers coming this way, only a few coolies and peasants; so they must be behind, and as yet a long way off, for I came along very quickly, much faster than they are likely to ride. But are you not surprised to see me again, Mooneea?"

"Yes, I am, sahib," replied the girl. "I never thought to see you again when I left you at the Marble Rocks; but are you going this way? Do you live anywhere near what my father calls his home, somewhere up in the ghâuts?"

"No, Mooneea, I cannot say I do," answered her companion. "My regiment is far away from there, and I should not have been here; but I am going quietly along this road towards Saugor to meet a friend of mine who will be leaving that place in a day or two.

"But I am very glad I came, as I have met you, and I shall see something of you, I hope, on your journey. I am in no hurry, and if your father won't object, we can make one party. Would you not be glad if we do that, Mooneea, tell me?"

"Yes, I should be very glad," answered the girl in a soft voice, while her face lighted up with joy.

"All right, then, I'll arrange it; but tell me, Mooneea, do you know where the dâk bungalow

is, for I must go there and see if they can put me up."

"Yes, I know where it is, as I often come to this village; but it is some little distance off. But if you are sure that my father cannot be here for some time, I will show you the way."

"Do, like a good girl," said Aylmer. "I know he cannot be here for a good hour, or even more, so come along, and I will bring you back in plenty of time."

The girl needed no pressing, and with a light step led the way, Aylmer walking by her side, leading his pony by the bridle, and they were soon out of sight of the village. It wanted about a good half-hour to sunset when they returned, and standing in front of the house, they lingered a while talking about to-morrow, and so it was they were seen by Hursooka on his arrival.

Directly the girl saw him, she flew towards him, and he greeted her affectionately, asking at the same time in a low voice,—

"Who is that sahib with whom you were talking?"

"That is the sahib who was so kind to me yesterday, when I went to say good-bye to the river. He is going to Saugor to meet someone, and that is how he came here," answered his grandchild.

Aylmer, seeing that the old man was eyeing him curiously, now advanced, and in a hearty manner said to him, putting out his right hand as he spoke —

"My friend, I am glad to meet you, and as

our paths lie in the same direction, we might travel together, for I am alone; and I was saying to your grandchild, when you came up, I should like to do so, as you are all Mahrattas, and it would improve my knowledge of that language to speak it for a time, for as you see I am but a poor hand at it."

"You speak it very well," replied the old man; "but, sahib, you know very well native ways are not your ways; and besides that, we travel very slowly, which would not do for you, as I suppose you want to reach Saugor as soon as you can."

"Not at all, I am in no hurry. I am only going along the road until I meet a friend of mine, so don't say anything more about it. I shall not be in your way, as I only want to travel with your party in the daytime, for, of course, I go to the dâk bungalow at night, while you all put up in the serai, as I can't very well go to a native inn; in fact, I suppose, they would not take me in"

The old man shook his head dubiously, and was about to reply, when the elder of his two companions interposed, saying,—

"Hursooka, I understand a little Marathi, and I heard what you and the sahib have been saying, and I think it a very good thing for him to go with us. You know we are carrying a great quantity of jewels and money, and to have an Englishman with us by day, and within call at night, would be a great protection. There are always lots of bad characters about, but they would be afraid to touch us then, so thank the sahib for his offer; and it will please my brother

and myself, for when we reach Saugor we are safe."

"As you please," replied Hursooka gloomily; "let it be so. I daresay you are right, and it will make the time pleasant for the girl, who is never so happy as when talking to the sahibs and their ladies, so let us say no more about it."

Aylmer threw a grateful look at the old man, who had gained for him what he wanted, and after bidding adieu to the party, saying he should see them again to-morrow, strolled off towards the bungalow.

Hursooka watched him until he turned the bend of the road and was lost to sight, then addressing his grandchild, who had stood patiently by him all the time, said,—

"Now, Mooneea, get you indoors; we shall stay here to-night, and I will come and see you when I have taken my friends to the serai."

Early the next morning the whole party started on their way, and on passing in front of the dâk bungalow were joined by Aylmer, who had been on the watch for them, and who, very shortly after exchanging greetings, left the old men to walk by the side of Mooneea, who was riding a small pony, and little by little, by judicious handling of the bridle, which he held as he went along, they fell behind the rest, and beyond their sight and hearing.

They did not say much to each other at first, but the face of the girl expressed the joy she felt, while her companion was satisfied to look at her, thinking that she was even more

beautiful than he had realised the day before, especially when she opened wide her large eyes and looked him full in the face.

"Mooneea," said he suddenly, "do you remember telling me in the boat about the dreams you had, and how you thought your mother came to you? Do you still have them?"

"Last night, sahib, she came to me more beautiful than ever, and," continued she solemnly, "my heart was very glad, for I knew then she had not lost me; and she looked happy, as if she were pleased I was making this journey."

"But what makes you think it is your mother?"

"That I cannot tell," replied the girl sadly, "for I never knew my mother. I was so young when she died, they tell me, that if I had any recollections of her, they must be so faint and uncertain—more like the remembrance of a dream that haunts one in sickness. But something tells me that, young as I was, I had known pain and grief, and dim thoughts sometimes float in my brain of another life, such as I dream; but they disappear so rapidly, I can recall nothing; and all I can remember is that, before I could even speak, I was a little girl playing with others of my own age in the village by the rocks, and taken care of by my father and my uncle Santoo, his son."

"It is very strange," said Aylmer musingly. "I wonder whether there is anything in it. Shall I ask your father about your early days, Mooneea?"

"No, no," cried she earnestly; "do not, I beg.

It always makes him sad if I say anything about when I was a child, and he looks at me so strangely. I suppose it is on account of my mother, who died so young, for she was his son's wife, and he loved her very dearly."

"All right, my dear girl, I won't. But let us talk of something more lively. Tell me something about yourself, and what you intend to do when you get to your new home."

The girl soon shook off the depression she always felt at the mention of her mother and her own childhood, and was soon in high spirits; and keeping up with her companion an animated conversation, that lasted them until they reached their destination for the night.

Day after day passed in a similar manner, Aylmer rarely leaving the side of Mooneea when on the march, although when a halt was made, or they had reached their resting place, he conversed freely with the men of the party; and through his frank and cheery ways soon became a prime favourite with all except Hursooka, who, however, did not show his dislike. And he could hardly fail to dislike him, for his presence with them upset his calculations, and he began to fear that his cherished scheme could not be carried out unless he left them before the attempt was made; for as yet he had not entertained any idea of serving him as he would the others. The goddess forbade the slaying of white men, and even if not, he well knew the hue and cry that would follow the disappearance of an Englishman. Many were the consultations he had with the others of the band, whom he summoned late at night for the purpose, but as yet no-

thing had been decided, and it had been settled to hold a final consultation, and take the omens, when they arrived near the place where the murder was to be committed.

And how had it fared with Aylmer and Mooneea during this time?

For the girl it was a pleasant life. The daily stages were not too long or fatiguing, there was no hurry, and every day brought a change new and fresh to one who had never been far beyond her own village.

And she was happy, far, far beyond her desires.

All these dreamy imaginings, which had never taken any definite shape, were now thrown aside, and life seemed a reality, and a precious one, for what more delicious to a young girl's heart than the consciousness of awakening love? For glorious in her eyes and in her heart, was the sahib who had been kind to her from the time of their first meeting; and who had become kinder still as their intimacy increased, and day by day her love grew stronger.

But also with it would come the sense of her own helplessness, for what could she, a poor Hindu girl, be to one of the dominant race, and so far above her in rank and station? And yet a word from him dispelled the gloom of these thoughts, and a new life, a new desire for life, grew within her, and day by day increased.

And was Aylmer aware of her feelings?

He could scarcely fail to be so, for too artless to use disguise, she showed in many ways the love that gratitude, in the first instance, had no doubt awakened, and it stirred him

deeply, for he had an innate modesty in regard to women, and he felt how wrong it would be to raise hopes in the breast of a young girl that could never be fulfilled, and oftentimes he resolved to leave her.

But his resolves were only passing thoughts, which fain would excite the mind to be just and reasonable, only to be driven away by the influence of passion; for despite all his good resolutions he was, he felt, stirred to the bottom of his heart by a touch, the sound of her voice, or by a look, and he grew angry with himself for calling forth what was growing to be part of her existence. He could not be mistaken, he knew the meaning in the look of those beauteous eyes. They told their own story.

Such was the position of affairs when the party arrived within two days' march of the city, and Mooneea, when parting from Aylmer at the door of the serai, informed him in a sad tone that to-morrow would be the last day of happiness for her, as her father had told her they would, before arriving at the end of the journey, branch off by a side road that led over the hills, leaving the two brothers and the sahib to continue their way to Saugor. This piece of news rather startled her hearer, for although he knew they must part, and that very shortly, he dreaded the parting, and had hoped it would have been delayed longer; but feeling that the last words he had to say to one who was, despite his good resolutions, growing more precious to him every hour, could not be uttered before the rest, he prevailed on the girl to meet him after their evening meal, which she promised to do. Mooneea

arrived first at the trysting place, but had not long to wait, for very soon after her arrival Aylmer appeared walking slowly from the direction of the dâk bungalow, and after greeting her affectionately, led her towards a clump of mango trees that grew near. Arrived within its friendly shadow, he turned towards the young girl, and in a voice, although he tried to control himself, spoke of the deep emotion he felt, said,—

"Moonea, dear, to-morrow we part. My heart is very sad at the idea, but I suppose it must be, as our ways lie different. We have been very happy these last few days, but as is generally the case after great happiness comes grief; and I am grieved to think that we have to feel what others have felt from the beginning of time, when fate and circumstances compel a parting which, although bitter and leaving a sting, must be endured in silent resignation, in obedience to a power stronger than their own will."

He paused, and throwing his arm round the waist of his companion, drew her towards him, passionately looking eagerly into her face, as if to see what effect his last words had produced.

And it was a happy look that met his; those glorious eyes were not startled, but soft, timid, and shyly raised towards him in trust and confidence.

But only for a moment, for the change came, and with eyes suffused with tears, and in a trembling voice, she replied,—

"Sahib, when you leave me, my happiness has flown for ever. I have seen your face, and listened to your words, and I love you; but

I cannot, alas! be anything to you, I know it full too well. The goddess sent me a lover such as my warmest fancy could ever have painted, but it seems I have gained only a few minutes of bliss, which would appear like one of those dreams I told you of, which have so often cheated my sleeping fancy, to leave me when I awoke to the bitter realities of my own sad life. But, as you say, sahib, the parting must come, and I say farewell to you now for ever, and I give you as a parting gift the love of poor Mooneea, with the prayer that you will forgive her in loving one so far removed from her, and in telling what she felt, as she knows that the women of your country would not have done so; but I know you will forgive me, for I am only a poor Hindu girl, and have had no teaching in the ways of your world."

She paused, and turning her head away, wept bitterly.

Aylmer let the tears flow silently for some little time, then drawing her closer to himself, exclaimed in tones that vibrated with passion,—

"My sweet one, it must be so now. We must part, but we shall meet again, and that ere long, for I must see you. I cannot leave you thus, and I shall come to you in your new home. Tell me, Mooneea, can you write?"

"Yes, I can," replied she. "I know it is unusual for a girl like me, but my dear old friend at the Marble Rocks taught me, and I can write and read Hindustani."

"All the better," said Aylmer, "for when

you arrive at your home, you can write and tell me where it is. See, I have put my name and address on this envelope, and you have only to enclose in it what you write, and send it to me, and I shall be sure to get it safely."

The girl took the envelope with a glad look, and was about to turn and leave her companion, for she felt she could not bear the strain much longer; when Aylmer arrested her departure, and taking her hand, placed on her finger a ring that he drew off one of his own for the purpose.

"Take this, Mooneea, and wear it always—never part with it—and when you look at it, remember the sahib who came into your life, and do not forget him, for he can never forget you." And stooping down, he kissed the forehead of the girl, and hurriedly left her without another word.

Mooneea looked after his retreating form until it was lost in the darkness, then walked slowly towards the serai, and shut herself up in her own room.

But not to rest; for all through the long and weary night she tossed to and fro on the mat that served her as a bed, and ofttimes a bitter cry escaped her as she repeated incessantly to herself, "He will remember me, he now thinks of me, he can never forget, and he would take me away if he could—yes, he would have done it if he could."

And Aylmer's reflections that night were not of the happiest, for he felt he was in the wrong, for he knew that he had awakened this

strong but disastrous passion. As he said to himself, "Disastrous it is in every way, for although she is beautiful, and possessed of the sweetest and most affectionate ways, with a mind that wants only cultivation to render it more bright than the casket that contains it, yet I cannot marry her. What would my people, what would the world say? How could I marry a poor outcast girl like this? And yet I love her, for to me she is as an angel on earth for innocence and beauty; and yet what can I do? To renounce her is hard, and to cease to love her is impossible; but to injure or cast a shadow upon that innocence and beauty is a thing that would not find admission in my thoughts. I must leave her now, but I must see her again."

An hour or so after this interview, the same clump of trees witnessed another scene, for Hursooka had summoned thither all the members of the band, in order to give the final instructions and to decide on the fate of the Englishman, which did not take long, for after discussing the matter in every way, and seeing no means to rid themselves of his presence, they resolved to invoke the goddess, and take the omens as a guide. These turned out most favourable, and in better spirits they separated, each knowing what was expected of him to-morrow, and confident of success. For although the sahib had been, at first thoughts, rather a stumbling-block, it was now all satisfactorily arranged, and he would die the death at the hands of the leader of the party and his son, when the fatal signal was made on the morrow, and disappear with

the rest in the graves that would be prepared for them.

Early the next morning they were all astir, for Hursooka had arranged an early start, so as to halt for the morning meal at the place where they were to come on the rest of the band cooking their food, and apparently total strangers to each other.

Much to the surprise of Aylmer, he found Mooneea still bearing in her face the signs of the troubled night she had passed through, dressed in boy's clothes, and with all her beautiful hair rolled up and hidden away under a small turban.

She met him frankly, and in answer to his question as to her dress, said it was the wish of her father, who told her that when they left the rest of the party they had a rough road to travel, and the people of the country were rude, so it was safer to travel disguised as a boy than in her proper attire.

About midday they arrived at the halting place where they were to prepare and eat their morning meal, and it had been selected with great judgment for the object they had in view.

The country between Jabalpur and Saugor is for the most part a wild waste, with few villages, and the road, stony and uneven, with a jungle thick and dangerous on either side, for nearly the whole of the way, and the place where the halt was made was below a slight ascent or spur of an undulation, the sides of which broke into small but rough ravines and watercourses, but which widened a little way on into a broad

expanse of waste land, entirely hidden from the view of anyone passing along the main road, with which it was connected by a steep, narrow path.

On arriving at this spot they found it already occupied by a party of men, honest peasants by their look, who were intently engaged on watching their cooking pots, placed on the little fires between three large stones, or kneading dough, and patting out chupatties, those little cakes without which no Hindu meal is complete.

After exchanging amicable salutations, Hursooka and his party were soon busily and similarly engaged, and in a short time their meal was prepared and eaten. Pipes were now brought out, and it was evident that the next hour would be devoted to smoking, and that indolent repose so dear to the natives of Hindustan after a repast. Hursooka saw that the time had now arrived, and with a silent nod gave the signal to rally round their victims. Unwilling, however, that the girl should be a spectator of the scene, he took her apart, and after placing her on her pony, he conducted her to the high-road, and told her to go gently along until he followed, as he did not like her to be in the company of so many men.

Returning by the little path that led down to the ravine, he saw with satisfaction that all the members of the band were in their allotted places, and only awaiting his signal to commence their deadly work.

Taking up his position close beside Aylmer, who was engaged in an animated discussion with Santoo, he slowly undid his waistband, an example followed by all the rest, and looking round

to see all was ready, cried out in a loud voice, "Ag laoo"—"bring fire."

The cry had hardly died away when the two brothers from Delhi, their servants, as also Aylmer, were struggling for life against the sinewy arms of the assassins, who had thrown the handkerchief around their necks, and were doing their best to strangle them.

Already the two old men had succumbed, and Aylmer's fate seemed almost decided, when like a lightning flash a boy's form dashed down the path, and in an instant was by his side, trying with feeble strength to release his neck from the deadly embrace of the fatal roomal.

Alas, without success, and another second would decide the issue of the unequal fight, when help came as if sent by heaven, for thundering down the steep path, at the utmost speed of his horse, came Ralph Carwithen, followed by a dozen of mounted sowars, sword in hand.

Touching his horse with the spur, a bound or two brought him to the group of whom the centre figure was the Englishman, as he could see from his dress.

Bringing his uplifted sword full and straight down upon the head of the boy, who appeared to be struggling with the victim, he then with a back stroke laid low the old man, the leader of the gang, then turned to look for the third he had seen.

But too late, for Santoo had, on perceiving the state of affairs, run swiftly up the bank, and was lost in the jungle, leaving his companions to their fate.

While Mooneea, the keen blade cutting through

the folds of the light turban she wore, inflicting a ghastly wound, fell face downwards, apparently lifeless, beside the insensible form of the man to whom she had already given her heart, and now as it appeared her life.

CHAPTER XV.

ON DARTMOOR.

Some five miles from Tavistock, and on a hill rising high up in the midst of three valleys that here unite together, is situated the pretty, quiet, and sequestered village of Foliot, one of the most picturesque, perhaps, of all the numerous little hamlets found on Dartmoor.

And, truly, the situation of the village, with its fine old church, dating some centuries back, as many a moss-grown stone bears testimony, is one of exceeding beauty; and the country round about, of green hills, wooded slopes, with the fine old Tavy and numerous other streams running through its length, is not less so, and it seems a place most perfectly fitted by nature for one who desired a quiet life to dwell in, and end his days in peace.

So, perhaps, had thought Ralph Carwithen, who had known the place from boyhood, Carwithen Farm, the home of his ancestors, being only some three miles away, and plainly visible

from the small house he had taken just outside the confines of the village, on his return from India two years ago, and where he led a very retired life, the only other occupants of his house being a dark, young girl of foreign appearance, his old nurse Hannah, and a stout Devonshire lass, who acted as cook.

The house, or rather cottage, was one of those small dwellings so peculiar for their picturesque beauty in the county of Devon. Of Gothic style, built of stone, with a thatched roof, its small windows, with their diamond shaped panes of glass, were surrounded with roses and myrtle, while ivy and creeping plants covered its sides, and honeysuckle in rich profusion decorated the stone porch which formed the entrance.

It stood in a garden, surrounded on all sides by a low wall of loose stones, and which showed more than ordinary attention, for every bed of flowers every plot of grass, had been carefully planned and laid out, and not a weed was suffered to grow either on the level, well-gravelled paths, or on the closely shaven lawn, whose rich green afforded a pleasant contrast to the brightly coloured plants and flowering shrubs.

In this charming place Ralph Carwithen led a most retired life of isolation almost from his fellow-creatures, neither paying nor encouraging visits from the neighbouring gentry, to all of whom he, of course, was well known.

At first this had given offence, but by degrees it was forgotten and forgiven, and he was looked upon as an eccentric character, induced probably by exposure to a tropical sun for so many years, or from annoyance that, although living within

sight of his home, it was not his, and consequently without it he would not take his proper position in the county.

Neither of these suppositions, nor the talk that constantly was taking place about him and the mysterious Indian girl who lived in his house, and who never spoke to anyone, disturbed the even tenor of his way; for as a fact he heard very little of it, and never seemed weary of his books and garden and long solitary walks over the moor.

At times the wish to possess the house he was born in, and its broad acres, certainly did arise within his breast, and it could hardly fail to be otherwise, as his eye dwelt daily on the ancient mansion, standing on the gentle eminence which was part of its domain, through an opening in the wooded hills immediately opposite his own house.

Pride or dislike to enter its gates as a stranger had prevented him from visiting the cradle of his race, and he rarely spoke of it; and even his old friend Lidgett was aware that it was a tabooed subject in his presence; and all he knew was that, after the death of his father, the entire property, house, furniture, and effects, had been purchased by a firm of solicitors in London for some client who avowed his intention of living there. This, however, he had never done, but the place was well kept and cared for, all orders for this purpose being given by the worthy lawyer Lidgett, who also acted as agent to the estate.

Such was the position of affairs with General Carwithen when we meet him again, just two

years after his rescue of Aylmer from the hands of the Thugs, and hourly expecting the arrival of that gentleman himself, who, not long arrived from India on furlough, was on his way to spend a week or so with his old chief, and to gain some information on a matter that lay very near to his heart.

It was a bright sunny afternoon in the beginning of June when he, after walking from Tavistock, arrived at the cottage, and stood contemplating it with delight, for, after an ordinary Indian bungalow, it was a thing of beauty, to be appreciated by one who had not seen an English home for many years.

And life was not wanting to animate the picture; for in the garden was a slight, young girl, with long, loose-flowing black hair, running over lawn and gravel with hat in hand, chasing a large gorgeously-tinted butterfly, which apparently eluded every attempt on her part to capture it.

Aylmer gazed on the scene in silence, thinking to himself what a pretty, active form and figure that girl possesses, when, catching sight of her face as a sudden turn on her part brought it into view, he gave a violent start, and clambering over the wall that separated the garden from the high-road, was by her side in an instant.

Taking hold of both her hands, and looking with eager look into her eyes, he exclaimed passionately,—

"Mooneea, Mooneea, my darling, it is you! Do you not know me?"

The girl, apparently frightened at her sudden

capture, started violently, and struggled to release her hands, but made no cry—not a sound of any sort escaped her lips.

Aylmer relinquished his hold, and stood looking at her in amazement, for strange to say, although free, she made no attempt to escape, but with heaving bosom remained motionless, regarding the intruder full in the face.

But with no look of recognition in the beautiful eyes, that met his fearlessly, with a regard that, although soft and gentle, contained no light, no life, nothing that expressed a thought or feeling. It was a tired, dreamy, melancholy look, as if lost in infinite space; in reality it was almost indescribable, but which on seeing could not be mistaken, and one felt instinctively that that which was wanting was the reflection of the soul.

Aylmer felt a strange feeling creep over him, and for an instant hardly knew what to think. No sign of recognition, no welcome from one who so largely shared his thoughts. But it was only for an instant, for like a flash of light the truth entered his brain, and in a choking voice he exclaimed,—

"May God have pity on us both, for she is both dumb and silly."

"Mooneea, Mooneea, where be ye?" cried out a female voice, apparently from the direction of the house, and turning round Aylmer saw a neat, elderly woman, dressed in black, coming towards them.

"And who might ye be, if I might make so bowld as to ax ee?" said she as she approached.

"I am Captain Aylmer," replied he, "and I know who you are without asking—you are nurse Hannah."

"Right you be, young man, and I knaw all about ee, and I be glad for to zee ee, and I only hop ye be gwain to stop vor a bit, for it will do maister Ralf a sight of gude, vor he never zeeth nawbody, and heth only got this here pare cratur along wi-un, and her is wuss than nobody, and only maketh un mazed fa' to luke at her."

"Tell me, Hannah, does she never speak? Does she not know anyone? Is she what you call daft in your part of the country, for I never expected to find her like this? The General certainly wrote me she was queer at times, and had difficulty in talking, but had hopes of her recovering from all that."

"So var as that goeth, zur, I caunt tell ee why maister Ralf dedn't give ee warnin' that ye'd vind the pore maid like er es, but that han't a got nort to du wi me—ye must ax of ee. But nobody can't deny that er es so dum as a bell wi'out a clapper, and her dorthn't mind nothin', nor knaw nobody, and her woan't du nothin' but what maister Ralf tellth her to du—more like a dogue than a Christen; but plaze, zur, to step inside, maister expecth ee, vor a tould ma jest now he was aveard you wadden a comin'."

And so saying she led the way to the house, followed by Aylmer and Mooneea, and in a minute the General was warmly shaking the hand of his favourite officer and former aide-de-camp.

The first greetings over, Aylmer turned to his host and said,—

"I was very much shocked, sir, to find Mooneea in such a sad way, as none of your letters ever hinted to me that she was totally dumb, and seemingly bereft of reason."

"That she is not, my dear boy," replied the General, "for the poor girl fully understands what I say to her, and behaves as rationally as any other young lady of her age. There is, however, something wanting, as her intellect appears dulled, but not lost; and as she cannot speak, she is unable to express her thoughts, and so appears worse than she really is, especially to anyone who sees her for the first time. But I know," continued he, "I was wrong in not telling you of this before you came. I acted for the best, as thinking ere this some marked improvement might have taken place, I did not want to alarm you unnecessarily. I am sorry I did not do it, however, as it must have been a sad surprise to you, and through my fault."

"Do not, please, say another word, sir," answered Aylmer warmly. "I know you wanted to spare me, if possible, and you had every reason to believe that time and care would work a change. But what you have told me now has made me very happy, and I begin to believe that she will get all right, and I will do my best to rouse her out of this state of apathy, and she will surely, after a while, remember me; and once she begins to think, she must begin to speak, and then all will go on well. But I want to know all about

what took place after I left you at Saugor, and also about my rescue. We were, if you remember, so concerned about Mooneea, the few days I could remain, that we thought and spoke of nothing else, and I never liked to ask you to write me the full account, knowing your dislike to much letter writing."

"I am no doctor, Aylmer, as you know," replied the General, "but I think there is something in what you say. We will carefully watch the child for the next few days, and then consider what is best to be done.

"You were quite right," continued he, smiling, "about my being a bad scribe, but you shall have the whole story after dinner, so come now and I will show you your room, as it will soon be ready. Your traps are all there; the carrier brought them before you arrived."

Dinner was over, and Mooneea had left the room, when, turning to his host, Aylmer said,—

"General, before I claim your promise to relate the story you promised me, I want to ask you if the dear girl is always so apparently attentive to what is being said, and does she usually stare so at people; for, as you must have observed, she never hardly took her eyes off my face, except to look at her hand, and turn and turn a ring she has on her finger. Does she often do that?"

"As for that," replied the General, "I often see her looking at that ring, and she evidently attaches great importance to it, for the only thing that ever makes her angry is to attempt to take it from her, or even to touch it is enough; and I also remember at Jabalpur, when

she woke from the stupor she was in so long, the first thing she did was to feel for it. Do you know anything about that ring, and why it seems so valuable in her eyes?"

"I gave it to her, and put it myself on her finger, the night before that fatal day when we said farewell," said his companion softly.

"That accounts for it," cried out Ralph Carwithen in a tone of triumph. "I never could make out why she cherished it so fondly, and, depend upon it, why she listened to you, and stared so, was that your voice seemed familiar to her, and she is evidently aware that there is some connection between the ring and yourself; but it is all hazy to her mind as yet. But it surely must be a good sign, don't you think so?"

"That I do, and I will do my best to encourage her recollection, and I must say I feel more hopeful than ever; but now, sir, as time is getting on, and I know you keep early hours in the country, for the story, if I am not troubling you too much."

"Not at all," replied the General. "I will begin at once; but let us light a cheroot first, for, as you know, I can smoke and talk at the same time. Well, to begin at the beginning, you remember I wrote to you at Jabalpur saying I was detained at Saugor, and advising you to come that way, and meet me on the road. As I got no answer, and you never turned up, although you could have reached me easily before even I left the city, I thought you had preferred to remain on where you were and await my arrival.

"Judge, then, of my astonishment when, just as I was striking camp just one day's march out, an elderly native came running in and excitedly told me that an English sahib had been travelling in company of some Mahrattas down the road for some days, that the night before they were one day's march off where I was, and that it was their intention to halt at a place that morning about four miles off to cook and eat their food. From the description he gave, I knew it could be no other than yourself; but I was fairly puzzled to know what you were doing travelling with a lot of natives, for there was no mention made of any but men composing the party. I, however, soon grew seriously alarmed about your safety, when my informant whispered to me that if I would not ask him any questions about the source of his information, or seek to detain him, he would tell me more.

"This I readily agreed to, and judge of my horror when he told me that your companions were Thugs, the remnant of once a bold band, and that it was a highly suspicious circumstance their halting where they intended, as it was a notorious place in former days for murder and robbery; and seeing that two elderly and evidently wealthy tradesmen were also of the company, it no doubt was intended to appear to come accidentally upon others of the gang in the ravine, and then and there strangle all those not of their fraternity, yourself included.

"My informant further added that, if I wanted to see you alive, I must hurry, as they would soon reach the place, and after minutely describ-

ing where I should find the path that led to the intended scene of slaughter, he hurried away, and I never have seen him again. And who he was I never knew, but my idea is that he was at one time a member of the same gang, and to spite someone, the leader, probably, for some affront, had turned informer.

"I immediately called out my escort, and galloped down the road, and soon reached the place, and I could not miss the path, for when some fifty yards away I saw a young native, who, as I thought, was on the watch, dart suddenly down it and disappear.

"I followed as hard as I could, and seeing you on the ground, with half-a-dozen hands busy about your throat, I went straight for them, cutting right and left. Two of your seeming assailants fell at once, the third escaped, and I did not follow, as I wanted to ascertain if you were yet alive or not.

"To my great joy I found you were, although half strangled, but you soon came to; and after looking wildly round and talking incoherently for a time, you seemed to remember where you were, and guessed what had taken place, for taking up in your arms the body of the younger of the five men, you commenced kissing its face, over which the blood was streaming, and in answer to my inquiry of what it meant, as I thought your reason had fled, you turned upon me a look such as I shall never forget, and said, clasping the inanimate form more closely to your breast, 'This is Mooneea, my darling, my love, and you have killed her.' I was thunderstruck, but knowing no time was to be lost to save the

girl, if yet alive, I immediately, after giving orders to my men to secure the prisoners, turned my attention to the wound I had innocently inflicted on the poor child. It was a terrible wound, and one side of the head was laid open from back to front, and if the turban had not broken in a small measure the force of the blow, instant death must have ensued. I stopped the bleeding as well as I could with wet cloths, and bound the head tightly round, and then sent off one of the sowars, to ride as hard as he could to Saugor, to fetch a surgeon and appliances for carrying in the wounded and also the dead, for my men had not been idle; but you were the only intended victim unhurt, the others were stone dead.

"By this time you were thoroughly yourself, and after thanking me and my sowars warmly for your rescue, attended patiently on the girl, while I turned my attention to the others.

"Soon assistance came, and we marched slowly into the cantonment, and you know what took place there, until you left to join your regiment six days after.

"After your departure, Mooneea remained in the same state of stupor as you saw her, to me a constant reproach, who, to my shame, had brought a woman to such a pass, and I felt I should never forgive myself. In time the wound healed enough for her to be moved, and she was beginning to rouse a little, but never spoke or seemed sensible, so I made my preparations for departure for England, taking her with me.

"My mind had been made up to do that very early after the event, for I felt as it was my

hand, my deed, that had changed so utterly a young life, and one so dear to my almost son, I could only repair the mischief as far as I was able by being to her as a father, and make her happiness, if she recovered, my constant care.

"As God is my judge, this I have done, and I shall continue to do so. She is now as dear to me as my own darling Muriel would have been if she had lived; and I pray for her recovery as the most priceless boon Heaven can bestow on one who would have died rather than have done such a cruel deed—a deed so abhorrent to my nature, and which, although innocent of in intention, I shall always feel morally guilty."

Pausing for a few minutes, Ralph Carwithen continued, in a lower tone,—

"I have hardly much more to tell you. The whole of the gang left alive were all hung soon after, with the exception of the old man their leader. I had dealt him such a blow that for months and months his life was despaired of, and he never quite recovered; and as it seemed needless cruelty to serve him as his comrades had been served, he was sent to the Lucknow Central Jail, but whether he is yet dead or alive I know not.

"He certainly asked for his grand-daughter, and for his son, and was told that the latter had escaped, and that the girl had in a measure recovered, and was being taken care of by the Government, a story which satisfied him, for he never mentioned them again.

"Since I came home, we have lived here as you found us to-day, and you have seen for yourself how I fulfil my trust—a trust most

sacred to me; and if it should please Him, who alone can order all things, to hear my prayers, I can end my days in peace, and in the recovered life of that poor girl find my forgiveness."

He ceased, and for some considerable time no sound broke the silence, when suddenly Aylmer rose from his seat, and grasping the hands of Ralph Carwithen between his own, exclaimed in a voice that, despite his endeavour, trembled with emotion,—

"I believe you. We must wait and hope."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DAWN OF HOPE.

A FORTNIGHT had passed, and still Aylmer lingered on in the cottage on the moor, hopeful at times, yet often a prey to despair, as he watched the varying changes in Mooneea; and wondered to himself if ever he should see that sweet face as he had first beheld it, or ever hear the music of the gentle voice, at once so timid and yet so reliant. The days had passed quickly, although each was a counterpart of the other; long talks about the past and future, and grand excursions on the moor, serving to fill up the time, the latter being always joined in by the young girl, for she was a famous walker, her general health being perfect, and accustomed to ramble about in all weathers either with the General or by herself. These solitary walks, of which, before the arrival of his guest, she had been particularly fond, were at first a source of great anxiety to Ralph Carwithen, as the girl would disappear for hours together, or even sometimes for the whole day.

But as time went on he ceased to fear for her safety, as she always returned before night fell, and as everyone about the countryside knew and took a great interest in the Indian girl, who never spoke in answer to their friendly greeting, but only looked at them, he felt assured there was no risk or danger in her favourite pursuit. But since the arrival of Aylmer she evinced no desire to leave the house by herself, although always ready to accompany him, whether by himself or with the General. In fact it may be said she was always on the watch so as not to let him be out of her sight, and which he rarely was, for except when Hannah came to fetch her charge at bed time, the pair were inseparable.

And it had undoubtedly produced some effect on the girl, for although she made no sign of recognition, and even shrank back if he attempted to offer her the slightest caress, yet she seemed to be struggling to escape from that species of apathy which appeared to be her natural state at present. And slight signs as if the brain had received some impetus to revive its dormant functions were observed by the keen eyes of him who loved her. For at times there were, but only fugitive, alas! flashes of awakened intelligence and brightness in her eyes, as if evoked by some passing thought, and even feeble attempts, as shown by the tremulous movement of her lips, to form words and speak.

All this had been carefully noted by Aylmer, and it struck him that if his presence was sufficient alone to awaken, even in a small degree, the lost faculties, what would it be, in

addition, if those who were with her possessed the skill and knowledge to foster and cherish the attempt, and so aid nature in the recovery. This he knew could only be attained by taking the advice and carrying out the instructions of one who possessed that knowledge; and surely, he thought, in the great town of London, teeming with men of intellect and talent, there must be some physician who had met with similar cases, or one who made such affections a special study. Full of revived hope at his happy thought, he broached the subject to Ralph Carwithen that evening, immediately after Mooneea had retired, for he felt the time had arrived when energetic action must supply the place, under proper guidance, of the *laisser aller* style of treatment, or rather no treatment at all, that had hitherto been followed, if they wished to see the girl recover.

"General," commenced he, "I hope you will not be angry with me for anything I am about to say. I do not think you will, for you are as anxious on the subject as myself; but I want to talk seriously to you about Mooneea, and decide what is best to be done.

"I am, as you know, sir, no more of a doctor than yourself, but I remember Westcott, our surgeon, once telling the story of a man he knew, who, having received a severe wound on the head in action, never spoke or noticed anything for a long time after, until taken in hand by some great man in the medical line, who perfectly cured him. Now, I think Mooneea's case is a similar one, and I more readily believe that now, than I did a week

ago, for lately I have remarked a decided change for the better in many ways; but, in my opinion, unless aided and strengthened by a proper course of treatment, it will come to nothing, and she will remain as we now see her.

"I am certain that intelligence in her is not totally abolished; and although I cannot go so far as to say she thinks or ponders over what she hears, yet she remembers recent events, but of the past, as yet, her mind is a blank.

"Now, the question is how to foster this rewakening of intelligence. I do not know myself, neither do you, sir, I suppose, but I feel certain that we are not going the proper way to work.

"I can fully understand your dislike to society, and also the repugnance you feel to have brought before you, before strangers, perhaps, the memory of the unfortunate accident and its consequences, of which you were the innocent cause; but do you not think, my dear General, that the life of isolation Mooneea leads here, seeing nobody but yourself and the old nurse, is bad for one in her state? Also, nothing in any way being done, for, as you told me, you had a horror of going into the subject with anyone, and so nobody who understands these things having been consulted, cannot conduce to improve matters; for although, I can fully believe, nature unaided can do a lot, yet I should imagine a gentle push would improve it, but don't be offended at my saying so."

"My dear Aylmer," replied his listener, after a short pause, "I am not at all put out, I

assure you, at anything you have said, rather the reverse, for I am glad to have this talk with you, for I was beginning to realise that I have not done my best for the unhappy victim of my rashness.

"I assure you, though, it is only quite recently I have thought so, only since you came, when I could not help noticing the marvellous change your presence has wrought, and I blame myself for not acting more energetically before; but you know, and I think appreciate the reason, for you mentioned it just now.

"I fully believe every word you have spoken to be true, and to the point, and I only trust that it is not too late, and that the time lost can be recalled. But what do you propose to do, for I shall leave myself entirely in your hands? You are young, energetic, and have every right to act on her behalf, so what you do I will joyfully sanction."

"Well, sir," replied Aylmer, "the first thing is, I shall go to-morrow to London, and find out the very best man in the whole place to tell us what to do. This can be done easily, as I know a lot of people, and directly I get him, I will let you know, and you will come up and join me, and I feel sure that we two and the doctor will entirely cure the dear child."

"And then?"

"I shall make her my dear wife," said Aylmer gravely.

"Spoken like a man and a gentleman," exclaimed excitedly Ralph Carwithen, "and I admire you for it. You love, and no one can

contest your right to love whom you please, and your duty to put yourself above the stupid prejudices of the world, after having stolen the heart of a young and innocent girl, who, although if not of your race or country, was no less a pure and loving woman than is any lady in our own land. The world may call it harsh names, and a mesalliance, but I do not.

"For proud peers have often married beneath them, as they call it, although I have remarked that, in time, society condones the offence and pardons them. But this is no mesalliance; it is a vindication of your honour, as also your faith that by marriage your own happiness, as also that of the dear one you have chosen, is for ever assured, so let others say what they will."

Aylmer warmly grasped the hand of his old friend, and after another half-hour's conversation on other topics they separated for the night.

The following morning he left for London, and on the third day after his departure a letter was received from him, stating that he had found the very man they wanted, that he had taken rooms for them, and they were to come at once.

He met them at the station on their arrival, and they were soon comfortably settled down in the Great Western Hotel, and Aylmer observed with joy that Mooneea evidently knew him again, and showed her delight at the meeting.

When they had a moment to themselves, the General exclaimed,—

"My dear fellow, I am heartily glad you were so prompt about this business, for ever since you left us, both Hannah and myself have been in a fever of anxiety about Mooneea; for we could do nothing with her, and from morning to night she never ceased wandering about all over the house, in the garden, or on the moor, as if searching for something she had lost."

"A good sign, General; and when we see my learned friend to-morrow you will see he will say the same," said Aylmer gleefully.

"Who is it you have got?"

"Well, I made every inquiry, and all agreed that Doctor Ogden, of Harley Street, Cavendish Square, was the very man we wanted, as it is in his line exactly, so I arranged to be at his house to-morrow at eleven for the consultation. I have already given him a slight idea of the case, and he says that after going thoroughly into it, and examining the patient, he will be able to say whether there is any hope."

"God grant there may be," said his listener solemnly.

Punctual to their time the whole party, including Hannah, were at the Doctor's house, and shown into his consulting-room, where they found him expecting them.

He rose from his chair on their entrance and cordially greeted them, and the General felt immediately, at first sight, that the arbitrar of their fate was one in whom he had every confidence.

For a clever face had the Doctor, and one that could be easily studied; for no part was

hidden either by beard, whisker, or moustache, although his head was well covered by an abundant crop of hair, which he wore rather long, and which, with his smooth face, gave him the appearance of being younger than he really was.

Of middle height, he carried himself uprightly, and in manner was rather sharp and decided, darting out his questions as if in a hurry, which was, however, not the case, for a kinder heart never beat; and he would spare himself no time or trouble to elicit the information from the patient that would enable him to form a correct opinion on his case. One habit he had, and which could not fail to be remarked; as after seating himself and commencing his interrogation, he habitually rested the elbow of his right arm on the palm of the left hand, and putting two fingers to his cheek, he thus made a support for his head, which he turned to one side, eyeing the patient before him much in the same manner as a bird when listening to a sound.

Asking them to be seated, he placed Mooneea directly in front of him, and never took his eyes off her face during the whole time, when Aylmer, at his request, related the entire story of their first acquaintance, of the events that followed, and of his observations as to her condition when staying on Dartmoor.

It took a long time in the telling, but Mooneea bore the ordeal of the penetrating gaze of the Doctor without flinching. For one thing, she knew nothing about what it all meant, and she appeared perfectly happy, sit-

ting quietly there holding Aylmer's hand and listening to his voice.

When he had finished, the Doctor, without a word, rose from his chair, and gently removing her hat, carefully examined the scar left by the wound on the girl's head, then did the same for her throat. Then sitting down, he turned to Aylmer, saying,—

"Now, Captain Aylmer, be so good as to answer me a few questions."

"With pleasure, Doctor," replied Aylmer.

"Well, then, when you first made the acquaintance of this young lady, now some two years ago you tell me, did she appear in any way strange—strange in her manner, I mean?"

"Not at all," replied Aylmer. "On the contrary, I thought her very intelligent, much more so than other girls of her country, who are not usually educated like Mooneea, who told me she could read and write Hindustani, and she spoke her native tongue, Marathi, correctly, and chose her words well. The only thing that struck me as peculiar in so sensible a girl was an idea, or rather, I should think, a fancy she had that her mother, whom she never knew, for she died soon after her daughter was born, came to her at night, and that she was very fair, like an English lady, and when she came she felt happy, and seemed to live another life. I remember she asked me if a person could live two lives at the same time."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Doctor sharply. After a pause he said, "Tell me, Captain, did she ever speak to you of her early days? Had she any recollections of them?"

"She never said much to me about them, except that the first thing she remembered in her life was that she was a little girl playing with others of her own age in the village near the Marble Rocks where I first met her."

"Did she ever say how old she was then?"

"No," replied Aylmer; "but from what the khansamah at the dâk bungalow there told me, she was about five years old or so when she was brought there by her grandfather; and now I remember a rather funny thing he told me about her."

"What was that?" asked the Doctor eagerly.

"Well," he said, "and this perhaps may account for her not remembering much, that although the age I tell you, she could not speak at all, and did not for some time after. He also said she had a bad fever when she came, and was very ill for months with it."

"This is interesting, indeed," exclaimed his questioner. "Please go on and tell me what you thought of her on the journey you took, and of the love passages between you?"

"Well, I have not much to say about that," replied Aylmer. "I found her a most intelligent companion, and soon grew to love her dearly, and it was with a mighty effort that I told her, after she had confessed her love for me, that we must part; for I was foolish enough then to think more of what the world would say than of my own feelings and honour. I don't now, I am glad to say."

"How did she take it? Was she excited?"

"Not at all. She was very much distressed, but spoke calmly, and said she knew a sahib

like myself could not marry a poor Hindu girl; but I knew from her appearance next day that she had cried her heart out in the night, but her manner to me was the same as usual."

"Thank you," said the Doctor briefly, "and now I have only another question or two to put, and I will ask them of the General, as for some time the young lady has never been out of his sight. Tell me, General, if ever you remarked any signs of returning intellect before the last two weeks?"

"Never. It has been only since Aylmer came; but now I observe a great difference. She appears more sensible, if I may say so. She always understood and did what I told her if I put it in simple words, and spoke slowly, either in Marathi or Hindustani, and she has never behaved in any way like a lunatic."

"No one ever said she was one," exclaimed the Doctor drily. "But," continued he, "tell me, General, after the accident, when the girl recovered a little, did you notice any symptoms of paralysis of the limbs on either side of the body, as I observe that the scar she bears is full on the side of the head."

"There certainly was no distinct paralysis," answered the General, "but I remember for some time her arm and left leg were weak, in fact she trailed her leg, if I can use that expression; but all that disappeared shortly after our arrival on Dartmoor, when she very soon got strong and well, and she can walk now further without fatigue than any girl of her age, I should think."

"Very good," said the Doctor. "Now, I have

only one more question to put to you, and that is, have you ever noticed the patient utter a word more or less distinctly, either in a right or wrong sense?"

"No, I cannot say I have," replied Ralph Carwithen; "all I have noticed was an attempt to speak, which certainly produced a sound, but which could not be called a distinct word."

There was silence for a time after the General had spoken, during which the Doctor appeared to be lost in thought, when suddenly raising his head, and looking his visitors full in the face, he said,—

"Well, gentlemen, I have heard all I wish to know about the case; and now I will give you my candid opinion upon it, hiding nothing, for I suppose you want to know exactly how matters stand with your interesting charge."

"We do," exclaimed both hearers eagerly.

"Well, then, although I do not wish to inflict upon you a clinical lecture, yet you must pardon me if I use a few technical terms, which if you do not understand, pray ask me to explain, as I wish to put the case clearly before you.

"It stands thus. The patient is suffering from aphasia, a condition in which persons lose the power of speech partially or completely without their mind being seriously involved; and without either a mechanical hindrance in the apparatus of speech, or paralysis of muscles, or injury to the nerves that preside over articulation or sound. Speech is an act of the will, and, therefore, if the mental or bodily processes by which it is produced undergo any disturbance, it ceases;

and even trifling causes are often sufficient to interfere with this function, and even abolish it for a time. And although I can hardly imagine mental activity being limited to the brain, for I look upon the whole nervous system being at once a mechanical apparatus and an organ of the mind, yet this form of speechlessness may be said generally to originate from brain disturbance.

"And this may be caused by many means, of which it will suffice to mention the most frequent, namely, changes produced in the brain by disease, and injuries to the skull leading to effusion of blood.

"Now, in this case, the evidence is clear, for the blow the patient received on the head is quite sufficient to account for her present condition; which might have been induced, in my opinion, by a less trifling cause, for I was much struck with what Captain Aylmer said about her not talking when even five years old. It is true that some maladies, particularly those attended by high fever, occasion this, as they give rise to some disturbance of the functions of the brain, and it was said she had been very ill for a long time with a bad fever. Now, without going so far as to say that one attack might cause a predisposition on the part of anyone to have another, we have here evidence to prove that the girl lost her speech after fever, and for some considerable time. Thence what occurred once may occur again, and when some years after she receives an injury, which may or may not cause the same condition, yet in her case it does, and I for one am not astonished. Now for my opinion of her

recovery," continued the Doctor after a slight pause.

"Taking into consideration her youth, her excellent health, and the signs you have mentioned, tending to show that the power of the mind, if at present in abeyance, is not utterly lost, as witnessed in the improvement since the Captain has been home; and which shows that the sight of him awakens some memory which struggles to be free and expressed in words, but as yet cannot be, the activity of brain and nervous force being too feeble, I think I may venture to say, with proper care and attention, she will entirely recover her mental activity and the power of speech."

"Thank you, thank you," cried the General.

"And now for the course of treatment to be observed.

"I will not hide from you the fact that I consider most valuable time has been lost, for speech is only possible when the individual lives, feels, imitates, and thinks, in the companionship of his fellow-men. And here this young girl, for whom it was a necessity, has been living a secluded life, with no companions of her own age, and only seeing yourself and the old nurse, and only hearing, when you did talk together, a language she did not understand.

"It is, however, not too late; but all this must be changed. Take a house or apartments in London, and get a lady to take charge of her, one who would be companion and governess at the same time; and who would follow out a methodical course of instruction, in speaking, not the language you talk to her, General, but good English, commencing with words in common use at first,

and repeating them over and over again, the pupil at the same time watching closely the mouth of the teacher.

"Let her mix freely with other people, especially with girls of her own age, and let the Captain see her daily and take her about—enter, in fact, into her life, amusing and interesting her in every way. While as for you, General, you can go back to your own home, for I question if the gay life I advise would suit you; and besides that, I want her to form new associations, new ties, so you and the nurse are better away for a while. That is about all I can advise at present; but bring her to me about every two or three months, and if necessary, I can tell you what to do further. But I must be off now," continued he, looking at his watch; "I have a lot of people waiting for me, so must say good-bye."

"One moment if you please, Doctor," said the General, "I only want to ask you if you can tell me where to find a lady who would take upon herself this charge?"

"Well, I do not know anybody myself just now. But—stay, I have it, I will give you an introduction to Mrs Saunders, a patient of mine, wife of an M.P., who bores one to death about India. She knows everything and everybody, and will soon find you what you want."

"I know her husband," replied the General.

"All the better. So go and see them at once, and say I sent you."

"So we will. But before we leave, let me express our heartfelt thanks to you, Doctor, for the very kind and patient attention you have displayed in the case of my dear ward. I shall

never forget it; and the cheering words you have uttered about her recovery have lifted a load of care from my mind, I assure you."

"Glad to hear it, my dear sir," replied the Doctor; and the party, after taking a cordial farewell, left his room and the house with hearts much lighter than when they had entered it.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN PRISON AT LUCKNOW.

A GREAT, gloomy building, or rather a number of buildings like barracks scattered over a large expanse of ground, with smaller ones like sheds in small enclosed squares, open to the sky, the whole surrounded by a high mud wall, together formed the Central Prison at Lucknow, affording accommodation to over a thousand malefactors, both male and female.

It did not look a strong place, such as one is accustomed to see prisons in England, or other parts of Europe; but it served the purpose in India, and evasion, or even attempts to escape, on the part of its inmates were rare, as the two entrances, which alone afforded ingress, were well guarded, and all along the outer wall were placed at regular intervals sentry boxes, where night and day in each an armed warder kept watch and ward, with strict orders to show short shrift to any prisoner trying to exchange confinement for liberty.

This was well known to all who had to undergo their punishment within its walls, and probably acted in a great measure to deter them from the attempt; but at the same time, considering that as, with few exceptions, all the men and women were natives of the country, the national trait of character crept in, and powerfully lent its aid.

For, whether innocent or guilty, the sentence of imprisonment, or even hanging, is heard by them with stolid indifference, and they go to the scaffold, or serve their time in prison, with an apathy deserving of a better cause. Looking upon it as their fate, and one that cannot be avoided, they are immediately reconciled to it, and meet death without a murmur, as if tired of life; or perform the labour demanded of them daily, if a shorter or longer term of imprisonment is their doom, with a patience and docility that would surprise anyone accustomed to deal only with the hardened criminals in countries of the West. Again, to many, no doubt, it was a haven of rest; for as sufficient for the day and no care for to-morrow is the motto of the hard worked and poorly fed of the lower classes in many parts of the country, they, no doubt, considered themselves well off in having everything provided for them, without any trouble on their part.

And as hard labour in Indian prisons would be considered very light in English ones, they were not overworked, and having daily, for them, good food and sufficient of it, with plenty of sleep, they were perfectly satisfied, for what more could the heart of man desire.

It was getting on towards eight o'clock in the morning of a day in the hot-weather season, and the sun's rays were beginning to exert their power within the walls of the prison, where it was decidedly warm, and so thought Doctor Westcott, the governor of the gaol; who for three hours had been going his rounds, seeing into everything, hearing complaints, and meting out punishment to refractory prisoners.

He had almost now completed his morning's work, and was standing in the surgery attached to the hospital, having seen those reported sick, as well as those already in the wards, for not only was he governor but medical officer as well, the two offices being usually united in India in the same person, probably for economical reasons.

He was not alone, for standing by his side was a slightly made man of middle age, dark in complexion, and with hair and beard of glossy blackness; a gentleman who had called on the Doctor the day before, with a letter of introduction from the Director of Prisons, and who bore on his card the name of Mr Cassanetti, being, as he said, Italian on his father's side, and whose object in visiting Lucknow was to study the interior economy of the gaol, prisons, and prisoners being subjects in which he was deeply interested.

The governor and his companion were just on the point of departure for the official residence, where early breakfast awaited them, when one of the native hospital orderlies came up and approached the Doctor.

"What is it, Chunda?" said he.

"Sahib, I have come to say Madhajee Jemadar is very ill, and he asked me to tell you. He begged your forgiveness, but would ever thank you if you would see him some time to-day, as he had something to tell you, and he cannot die without making it known to you."

"He is not going to die all at once," replied the governor, "and I can't stay now to listen to a lot of rubbish; but tell him I will come and see him after my evening visit."

Turning towards his visitor, who had been a silent listener of the conversation, he continued,—

"Mr Cassanetti, if you are interested in felons, this man who wants to see me is one of the deepest dye, and worthy your attention and study."

"I should like to see him," replied the other; "but who is he, and what has he done?"

"He was a good many years ago one of the most notorious Thug leaders in India, and has committed goodness only knows how many murders, for he told me the other day he had lost all count of them. When our Government put down Thuggee, he retired into private life, and passed as a cloth merchant. But the old leaven was, I suppose, strong within him, for some two years ago he got together some members of his former band, and attempted his old tricks upon two jewellers from Delhi, who were carrying a lot of valuables with them. And not only on them, but he nearly strangled

Aylmer, an old comrade of mine who had joined the party, attracted by the charms of the old ruffian's grand-daughter, and who was only saved by the opportune arrival of my dear old Colonel. Now this was certainly carrying matters to extremes, for in their palmy days the Thugs, with rare exceptions, avoided the English, for it is said they were forbidden by their goddess to slay them; but my opinion is they were afraid to do so."

"What is the man's name?" asked his listener, "for I did not catch it when your orderly spoke to you."

"Madhajee Jemadar is his real name, but for many years past he has been known as Hursooka," replied the governor.

"The very man!" said the other to himself; "my information is then correct. But how to get at him?"

Turning towards his host, he said in measured tones,—

"Your story is very interesting, my dear Doctor, and I should very much like to see this man, and have a talk with him; stories of Thuggee and Dacoity interest me deeply. Could I be allowed to visit him?"

"Certainly, you can. I will give you an order, and any time you like, you have only to come to the hospital here and ask for Chunda, the orderly you saw just now. He will take you to him, and he can tell you a lot more about him than I can, for he looks after and nurses the old man as if he were his father."

"But how is it that he was not hung,

when he was caught in that last attempt of his?"

"Well, he certainly deserved it, and would have been only he was too far gone at the time of the trial to appear. How he ever lived is a mystery to me, for the General gave him a blow on the head sufficient to kill two men; and he was perfectly insensible, and at death's door for months after. He by degrees got better, but by that time all his companions had been tried and executed, and as he was old, and with no chance of entire recovery, the Government took a lenient view of the case, and sent him here to end his days. He improved at first, but the confinement was too much for his restless nature, and he has gradually pined away, and I think I may say he is not long for this world."

"And what became of the girl, his granddaughter?" said the other eagerly.

"Well, I can tell you about her," replied the Doctor, "for strange to say, I got a letter from Aylmer by the last mail, and he gives me the latest information about Mooneea, for that is the girl's name, and I should think, from what he says, she must be something charming, for he is quite off his head about her."

"Where is she? Do tell me!" exclaimed his companion.

"Well, it seems, after being very bad for a long time from the effects of the cut she got on the head from my old chief when he rescued Aylmer, he taking her for one of his assailants, for she was dressed in boy's clothes,

his conscience pricked him for striking a woman, I suppose. Anyhow, he took her with him to England, and adopted her as his daughter, but she could not have been a very lively companion, for she lost both memory and speech, although Aylmer says that is coming back now, thanks to the advice of some doctor they consulted in London some six months ago. But let us get back now to the house, for it is getting late, and unpleasantly warm out of doors, and I want my breakfast, and afterwards, if you want to know anything more about the affair, I will tell you."

The prison and its environs soon became silent and deserted, all its inmates seeking the shelter of the four walls of the different buildings, to avoid the sun's rays and the hot wind, and it was not until five o'clock that some little life became apparent.

At that hour Mr Cassanetti, the guest of the governor, was seen approaching the hospital, from the direction of the official residence, by the sharp eyes of Chunda, who had been looking out for him, and who meeting him half way, conducted him straight to the place of confinement of the Thug leader.

He lay on a mat in the centre of a sort of shed, that closed in front by a door, and had light afforded to it by one solitary window, that looked out on to a small courtyard, or rather a narrow strip at the back of a fairish-sized yard in which the building stood; and which was entered by a gate, which, however, stood wide open, the inmate being far too feeble to attempt to leave his dwelling. As they entered, he gave a sharp look at

the stranger, then looked down on the ground, and appeared lost in thought.

"You need not wait for me, Chunda," said the visitor. "I want to have a talk with the old man, so you had better get back to your work, as I may be some time."

"Very good, sahib," replied the orderly, and making a salaam, he quitted the hut.

Left alone with the prisoner, he looked at him intently for several minutes, then muttered to himself in Italian: "It is the man; I never forget a face, although he is much altered since I saw him twelve years ago. Now to get him to talk, for I don't suppose he will have any recollection of myself, so I must say somebody told me about what I am going to ask him."

"Well, Madhajee," continued he aloud, "I have heard about your doings, and what a great man you have been in your day, so I have come to see you, and have a talk about old times."

"Sahib," said the old man gently, "I am very ill and feeble. My spark of life is very dim, and soon will be quenched for ever, and I have other things to think about than to tell stories of what I have done. Enough to say that I am what they told you; that I have done what they say, and much more besides which will never be known, for death is not far off, and my lips will be closed for ever; and nothing but the memory of Madhajee the Thug leader and his deeds will remain to be spoken about, as they will be by my countrymen for many a long year."

"Of that I have no doubt," replied his visitor, "but I don't want to ask you a lot of things about your past life. I have only one question to put to you, and I see no reason why you should not give me a truthful answer to it, as no one could harm you now for what you have done."

"What is it, sahib?" said the prisoner, looking his questioner full in the face.

"What became of the young girl you carried off from Morar, the day of the races, twelve years ago?"

"How do you know, sahib, that I did so?"

"I know you did, for I was told so by the sahib who bribed you to do it, when he was dying. I have been seeking you for a long time to know the truth, as he suspected you did not perform all you were paid to do."

"Then he was wrong, sahib," replied the old man sadly. "It was a piece of work that I ever felt sorry for, but what could I do? I was given money to take the little one and put her away, and I did so. I strangled her, and the body was burned in Old Gwalior, like any native girl who had died a natural death."

"Is that true?" said the other eagerly.

"Sahib, I am an old man, and have not many days to live now. As you say no one can harm me for my past deeds, therefore why should I tell you a lie, for it could do me neither evil nor good; but I pray you to leave me now, for I hear Chunda coming, and I would not he

heard anything about what you have been saying."

"Very good, old man, I will go; but I tell you I only half believe you. But how to get at the truth?" muttered he, as he opened the the door of the hut and went out, running almost into the arms of the governor, who, after a few words with his guest, entered the room the other had so recently quitted, closely followed by his orderly, who shut the door immediately they were within.

Left to himself, the first act of Mr Cassanetti was to look all around, then seeing no one in sight, and knowing himself to be unobserved, he crept on tiptoe, making not the slightest sound, past the entrance of the hut, and made his way into the narrow courtyard at the back, where he crouched down immediately below the open window that gave light to the building, and where he could hear every word that passed between its inmates.

"Well, Madhajee," said the governor on entering, "how are you to-day? Chunda tells me you are very bad, and that you have something to tell me. What is it?"

"I am bad, sahib, but you can do nothing for me. That blow on my head, and the confinement of body and spirit, has finished a life, one already old, and I am resigned to die like a man and a Thug, for death has no terrors for me. I have been familiar with it from childhood, and I have not been a bad man, nor failed in my duty or trust. There lives not the man who can say one word against the honour of Madhajee Jemadar."

"Well," replied the Doctor, "I should say opinions differ on that point. If you have been a good man, and not a bad one, as you say, how do you reconcile your conscience to the countless murders you have committed? I should think that the fact of these awful crimes would outbalance any of your better qualities."

"Not at all, sahib. In following the profession to which I was born, I was but an humble instrument in the hands of Bhowanee, my loved and dreaded goddess. I never killed anyone, it was She; for had I possessed the strength of ten men, my roomal could not have strangled them without her will. We are all born to our fate. Your gods, doctor-sahib, tell you and aid you to save life, whereas mine told and aided me to destroy it. But it is not right for the servant to argue with his master, and I know also that I could not persuade you to think as I do"

"Not at all likely," said the other smiling. "But get on with the story you have to tell me, for it is late, and I have other business to do than listening to your talk. And, Chunda, get you gone to the office, and if I am wanted particularly, you come and fetch me."

Directly the door had closed after Chunda's retreating form the Thug leader turned to his companion and said in earnest tones,—

"Listen well, sahib, to what I tell you. I did a great wrong once in my life, and I ever regretted it; but it is not too late, with your help, to undo the mischief I have caused, for I know they are all still living."

"My help? How can I assist you to repair any crime of yours?"

"I will tell you.

"Some twelve and a half years ago I was at Gwalior, living in the old city; when one night an officer in the army of the Maharajah sent for me, and said he would give me a large sum of money if I would carry off, and put away afterwards, the child of someone in Morar. I agreed, and met him on the day appointed, and the child, a little girl, was brought to me by her ayah, who had been bribed to do so. With my roomal I half strangled and thoroughly gagged the little missy, and took her to my house in the town."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed his listener, "why, it must have been little Muriel! Did you know the name of the child?" continued he, turning towards the prisoner.

"Not then, but I found it out afterwards. She was the daughter of the colonel-sahib of the cavalry. 'The Yellow Devil' they called him."

"Carwithen, by all that's sacred!" cried out Westcott excitedly. "Go on, go on! Tell me what became of her, and who prompted you to do this deed."

"The sahib's name I know not, but he was always called the count-sahib. He was not like an English sahib, but small and dark, and spoke another language to others like him who were in the Rajah's army."

"Count Corsi, as I live! But go on—what became of Muriel? Did you kill her?"

"No, I did not. I was going to do so, and

had my roomal round her throat, when she looked at me with her pretty eyes, and my heart turned to water. I could not do it, and I had not sworn to do so, and besides she was English, and Bhowanee forbids us to slay them."

"What became of her?"

"I took her to my own house, and said she was my grandchild, and as she was very ill for a long time, from fright and a bad fever, she lost her tongue, and could not speak for many months; and when she did, she had forgotten her own language, and only talked ours, so nobody ever knew who she was. I called her Mooneea, and she dwelt with me until she was fifteen years old, and was with us, dressed as a boy, when we were captured. I heard afterwards she was hurt by the same hand that struck me down, as she was trying to save the young Englishman she loved; that she got well, and was taken care of by the Government. More I do not know—do you, sahib?"

"Yes, I do," replied his hearer earnestly, "and I will tell you, and if you can give me proofs of your statement, you have it in your power to render both her and others happy; for it was the hand of her own father that cut her down, and in pity for her he took her away, and she is now living with him as his daughter, although he knows it not."

"The time has then arrived," cried out the old man in a loud voice, "and I knew it would; the goddess always loved her."

"But the proofs—the proofs!" cried the Doctor excitedly.

"I have them. You have only to go to the little village close to the Marble Rocks, near Jabalpur, and ask for the house of Hursooka the cloth merchant. Show this writing to the man who now occupies the house, and he will aid you. Take up the clay in the centre of the principal room, and dig down, and you will find a box of native work. In that box are the clothes the child wore when I carried her away, as also a necklace, and a curious little ring she had on her finger—one that her father would easily recognise."

"And you are telling me the truth?"

"As I hope to live another life hereafter, I swear I have not lied to you, and that you will find what I say."

"Enough. I will go as soon as I can, and when I come back, you will tell this story again before others; and it shall be written down, and if true I shall be the happiest man alive, for I would do anything for the chief and dear little Muriel, whom we have thought dead so long."

"You must make haste, sahib, for I have not long to live."

"You will live long enough to do what I say. Your goddess may be cruel, but as you believe in her, pray with all your strength that she may grant you life to undo the wrong you did to an innocent child; but I must be off now, for here is Chunda to fetch me," as the entrance of the orderly caused him to stop his exhortation.

"You stop here, Chunda," said he as he left the hut, "and look after the old man, for he is exhausted by talking. Get him anything he wants from the hospital."

He had not been gone a minute, when a slight sound fell on the quick ears of the native, who cautiously opening the door a little, peeped out just in time to see the visitor of the governor, and whom he thought was far away, steal quietly from behind the hut, and passing out of the gate, walk gently away. He uttered an exclamation of surprise, which aroused the attention of the prisoner.

"What is it, Santoo?" cried he.

"Only this, father, I saw that dark sahib, who came to see you this evening before the governor, come from behind the hut this moment, and I think he was there all the time you were talking, and he must have heard every word, for the window is open."

"Now may the dread Bhowanee preserve and aid me!" cried out the other in a broken voice; "if it is so, all I have said and done will be of no good, for that man understands Marathi, and would do anything. He little knew I recognised him, but I did, although he is disguised with his long beard and whiskers; and he knew me, of that I am certain. I told him nothing; but if he was listening, he knows all now, and will again attempt the life of the girl, my poor Mooneea. But he sha'n't; I will stop that. Listen, Santoo," continued he, "you have been a good son to me, and braved death; to come within the walls of this prison to cheer and comfort the last days of your father. I have,

as you know, not long to live, and I call on you now to show again a proof of your love for me. When I say the time has now arrived, you will understand what I mean, and it has come. Mooneea is with her father, who knows it not; and I have told the governor-sahib everything, and he leaves at once to fetch the box we hid before we left our home.

"All was well done, but what you tell me frightens me, for that man you saw leaving just now is the count-sahib, who made us take away the girl that day from Morar."

"What is to be done?" cried out Santoo, "for if he has heard, and I know he has, he will kill the governor first to get the box, and Mooneea afterwards, for it is certain he has some great wish for her to die."

"There is only one way, Santoo," said his father, after a pause. "You know a little English; you must find out what he does, or is going to do, and then follow him. Disguise yourself as an oldish man, you know how, and get him to take you as his servant, and then you could stop any scheming on his part. You know where my money is at Bombay; it is all yours now, and you are rich. Spare nothing to prevent any harm to Mooneea."

"I will obey you, father, and I can easily do what you say, for I know what that count-sahib is going to do, for he spoke about it in the hospital this morning."

"And what is it?"

"He said he should leave in a few days for Bombay, and then stop at the Byculla Club until my master came there, for, as you know, he is

going to England, and he said he would wait, as he was in no hurry, and they could share the same cabin in the ship."

"The very thing! Nothing could be better. He will want a servant, so do you do what I have told you, Santoo, and all will yet be well. It would be no good my telling the governor-sahib who, and what his friend is. He would never believe me, and further proof than my bare word I cannot give. No; the task must be left to you, Santoo, my well-beloved and faithful son."

CHAPTER XVIII.

PLOT.

WHILE these events were transpiring in the Far East, and even for some time before them, the lives of Mooneea and her friends were gliding on peacefully and happily, bright hope having taken the place of gloomy despair. For the General and Aylmer had acted at once on the advice given them by Doctor Ogden, and the afternoon of the same day found them both standing on the steps of a large, fine house in the Cromwell Road, bent on a visit to Mr Saunders, and to obtain an introduction to his wife, whose aid they were about to solicit to further the object they had in view.

They rang the bell, and in answer to their inquiry were told Mr Saunders was at home.

Sending in their cards, after a few minutes that gentlemen himself entered the room into which they had been shown, with outstretched hand and a look of real pleasure on his face.

"My dear General," said he, after cordially greeting his visitors, "this is kind of you to come and look me up, for I have often wondered where you were, as I never meet you in London. I hope you are going to stop some time now, and let me repay in a small measure the hospitality you showed me in India."

"Thank you, Mr Saunders, it is very kind of you to say so," replied Ralph Carwithen; "but I doubt if I shall stay very long. I have a matter to arrange before I leave, however, and I have come to ask you to be so good as to introduce me to your wife, who, I think, can assist me. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"No; wait a moment, my wife is in, and I will go and fetch her, and then you can tell us what you want, and if either of us can assist you in any way, consider it done," and so saying Mr Saunders hurriedly left the room, to return in a few minutes with a handsome lady of middle age, with an intelligent, kind face, whom he introduced to them as his wife.

After a few minutes' conversation on ordinary topics the General turned to the lady, saying,—

"I trust you will pardon me for troubling you about our affairs, but Doctor Ogden told us to come to you and explain matters, and he felt sure you could assist us greatly."

"I know the Doctor well," said Mrs Saunders smiling, "and he has a great idea of my powers of assisting others, which I am always very

glad to do; and I shall be delighted if I can be of any service. But please tell me what it is, so that I may know if I can do so."

"Well, if you don't mind listening to a rather long story, I will explain the whole affair, as I think it right you should know everything; and when you do, I am sure you will feel interested in the case, and if in your power, aid us in every way."

"That I am sure we shall," said husband and wife in one breath. "So, please, begin."

Ralph Carwithen, seeing that he had kind-hearted people to deal with, took courage to relate the whole story, from his first seeing Mooneea up to the present time, and at the end dwelt forcibly on all Doctor Ogden had said that morning. It was listened to in silence, then Mrs Saunders, after a pause, exclaimed,—

"A most sad, yet interesting story, and I do trust the Doctor's predictions may come true, and that your ward will entirely recover. I quite agree in what he told you to do, as I have heard of something very similar to this, and I know the very person to carry out the directions."

"How fortunate!" exclaimed her hearers.

"If I searched the world over, I could find no one better than Mrs Loring," continued Mrs Saunders. "A widow, evidently well born and well bred, and neither too young nor too old to go into society with her charge. I have known her seven years, in fact ever since she went as governess to the only daughter of Lady Everall; and I know she must possess

a good temper and patience to have done what she has with that spoilt child. She is leaving as the young lady has grown up now, and was presented at the last Drawing-Room, so does not want a governess, although the whole family are sorry, in fact want her to stay; but she will not, being too independent, I suppose, to remain with nothing to do."

"Would you see her and ask her if she will take charge of Mooneea?" asked the General.

"I think she will," replied Mrs Saunders. "Anyhow, I will see her to-morrow morning, and explain everything, and then, if you and Captain Aylmer will do us the pleasure of joining us at luncheon, I will tell Mrs Loring to be here at three, when you can see her after, as we lunch at half-past one."

"Thank you sincerely; and pray excuse me if I mention that any terms the lady proposes I am ready to agree to."

"Oh, I will arrange all that," said Mrs Saunders; "and now good-bye until to-morrow, General. Excuse my running away, but I have an appointment I must keep, so I will leave you to my husband's tender care. He will be delighted to have a cigar with you, and talk about India and the Indians."

The following day they all met, and after luncheon was over, repaired to the drawing-room, and as they entered a tall, slightly made woman rose from her seat and advanced to meet them.

"My dear Mrs Loring," said their hostess, after warmly greeting the visitor, "let me

present you to General Carwithen, whose ward is the young girl I told you of yesterday, and whom we want you to take charge of. I did not mention any names, not being certain if you would accept, and the General does not wish the story to be known; but as you have come this afternoon, as we agreed if you were willing, no more need be said, and we may look upon it as settled: so arrange with the General what time you should go to-morrow to see your new pupil for the first time."

Not being a very keen observer, the speaker had not remarked anything unusual in the usually calm and sedate manner of the governess, who gave a violent start at the mention of the name of Carwithen, then turned pale, and looked as if about to faint.

This had also escaped the notice of the General, who, always shy and retiring with ladies, had barely looked at her when the introduction took place, and only sufficiently to know that he saw before him a woman with a pale face, and features drawn and marked as if some great sorrow had robbed them of their freshness, showing only now a look of patient resignation to her fate. She appeared to be about forty years of age or so, but it would have been difficult to tell exactly, for although her hair was grey, yet her figure was slight, and her eyes appeared bright; but little could be judged exactly on this point as she wore a large pair of blue spectacles, rarely removed, as she always said the light affected them. Simply dressed in a black costume, with jacket and hat to match, she appeared to be

just what Mrs Saunders had said—a reliable person as governess and companion to a young lady.

"My dear lady," said the General, "I have no questions to ask. Mrs Saunders has told me all about you, and I can see you are kind and patient, and I am only too happy to know you will take upon yourself the charge and education of our dear Mooneea. It is, I know, a difficult task, and one that will give you trouble and anxiety; for although, as far as I can make out, she is getting on towards eighteen years of age, yet you must take her like an infant from its cradle, for the poor girl knows nothing, and cannot even talk.'

"I accept the trust," replied his listener in a trembling voice, which, however, grew firmer as she proceeded, as she saw the General listening quietly. "I care not what trouble I take, for after hearing her sad history I am interested in the dear girl more than I can tell you. I will devote my life to the object you have in view, and be to her as a mother; and it is a labour of love, as you know, for a mother to work for and benefit her child."

"I thank you sincerely, Mrs Loring, and I trust Mooneea will soon regard you as such, for a mother has always over her child an influence that no other woman can possess; and in this case we are dealing with, I may say, a mere baby, although of womanly age. But, pardon me, I know you are a widow, have you had any children?"

"One," replied the governess, trying hard to hide her emotion.

"A boy?"

"No; a girl. But I lost her when very young, and I have never quite got over the blow."

"Poor woman! poor woman!" muttered the General to himself, then aloud,—

"All is now settled, Mrs Loring, and if you will be so good as to come to our hotel to-morrow morning at eleven, you can see Mooneea, and then we will all go out house-hunting. So let us say good-bye to Mrs Saunders, whom we have been keeping indoors all this fine afternoon, and let me at the same time express my warmest thanks for all her great kindness to myself and Aylmer."

"I am sure I am as pleased as anyone of you," replied their hostess; "and when your ward gets a bit better, and can go out into society a little, why I can then assist you again, so please don't be backward in asking my help."

"We will not, I assure you," said both together, as they shook hands with the warm-hearted lady and took their leave.

The following morning, punctual to the appointed time, Mrs Loring arrived at the Great Western Hotel, and was shown into the sitting-room, where the General was awaiting her; and by his side stood Mooneea, who, at the noise made by the opening door, raised her eyes in the direction with a glad look, but which turned to one of indifference, although she stared hard at the strange lady who entered.

"Good morning, Mrs Loring. Here is Mooneea waiting for you to see her, although I have had

a hard job to keep her quiet. Aylmer had to go out on some business this morning, and she is eagerly watching for his return. Come here, Mooneea," continued he in Marathi, "and look at this lady. She is going to live with you, and be to you as a mother, and so you are to try to love her, and do all she tells you. She will teach you to talk, and also many other things, and if you are good, you will please me and all who love you."

Not understanding all that was said yet, Mooneea gathered sufficient of the meaning that the lady was in some way or other to become connected with her life, so when the General had ceased she stared hard at the new-comer, at first angrily. But the look of anger soon gave place to another, for the first sound of the voice of her governess, who in soft and caressing tones said quietly, "I hope you will get to love me, Mooneea," created a sudden change, one of surprise, as if its tones had produced some mysterious vibration, and touched some chord of memory within her darkened mind.

For some little time she appeared to be trying to think of something, but with no result; for a dark cloud gathered on her forehead, which soon, however, became bright and clear, and with an unwonted sparkle in her eyes she suddenly darted forward, and taking within her own one of the hands of the lady, she raised it and held it to her forehead.

"That means," said the General, who had been watching attentively the scene, "that Mooneea likes you, and will obey you. If she could speak, she would say, in the language of her own country,

'I am your servant. You have only to command, I obey.'"

"The dear child," replied the new governess. "I am so glad she likes me, and I trust to see that feeling grow stronger day by day. If it does not, it will not be from any lack of sympathy on my part."

"That I am sure it will not. But here comes Aylmer," as the door opened as he spoke, "so we can now all start off to see the houses he has selected. But look at Mooneea, how happy she appears," as the girl with sparkling eyes flew towards her lover, and placing his hand within one of her governess's, raised them to his forehead exactly as she had done with her own.

"I know what that all means," said Aylmer laughing, "and I promise to honour and obey you as long as I remain an inmate of your house, for you are the mistress, and I am only a humble visitor. You see, Mrs Loring, the General and I have talked the matter well over, and seeing no impropriety, we have settled that I form one of the family."

"It is absolutely necessary," broke in Ralph Carwithen. "Our great object is to keep Mooneea quiet and happy, and that would not be the case if she did not know he was under the same roof; and if she missed him, nothing would keep her in. She would be out through the window if you locked the door, and would be off searching for him, and then goodness only knows what would become of her all alone in the streets of London at night."

"I quite agree with you, sir," replied Mrs

Loring gently, "and I see no reason to prevent Captain Aylmer residing in the house as you both propose."

"Spoken like a sensible woman. And now let us be off and find the house," exclaimed the General briskly.

Their search was rewarded with success, for they found a well-furnished house in the Longridge Road, near to their friend Mrs Saunders, that exactly suited them; and in two days' time the governess and pupil, with Aylmer as guardian, were completely settled down in their new home, and the General and old Hannah in their own little cottage on Dartmoor, and the teaching of Mooneea commenced.

In the first few days Mrs Loring could not hide from herself that she had undertaken a difficult task; but which she felt was not beyond her strength, for she would allow herself neither to see or think of anything but the one object they had in view, and she said to herself, often and often, that no matter at what cost, no pains should be spared by her to attain it.

Besides the affection she at once felt for her pupil, very soon to be changed for a quasi-maternal love that astonished her, gave her courage and strength, and she threw herself into the work with an enthusiasm and ardour that she had never before known. To love, to attach or devote herself to someone, was a necessity to the heart and soul of this patient woman; who had evidently suffered, and had lived for long years without finding any object upon whom to lavish the treasures of kindness and affection

which had hitherto been locked up in her own breast, as a palliative to her sorrow, a remedy to soften the bitterness of her thoughts.

For it was plain she had suffered much, and evidently with no hope that a time would come which would put an end to what she endured. So she bore it with quiet, patient resignation, but with a void in her heart that as yet had never been filled since the commencement of her sorrow. Nothing, then, could have pleased her better than to have the charge of Mooneea confided to her sole care. Pity for the poor girl, who although so young had already known grief, and was stricken with a most terrible affliction, drew her first towards the innocent child, whom she was to form, to educate, in fact to create. She took no account that her pupil was nearly a grown woman, she only could look upon her as a little child, and for whom she was all in all, and the instructress vanished, and it was the mother, full of tenderness and solicitude, with soft words and caresses, that took her place. She remembered that she too had been a mother, but as she said to herself, was she not so again, near this child, the child, true, of another woman, that chance had thrown in her path, but for whom it was a labour of love to do all for her as if she were her own offspring.

With such feelings the task was rendered light, and Mooneea herself assisted greatly, for it became soon evident, as shown in many little ways, that she reciprocated the affection of her governess, and was as patient and docile as a toddling child at its mother's knee.

Following out implicitly the recommendations of the Doctor, who saw the girl from time to time, and expressed himself well satisfied at every visit, Mrs Loring by degrees, slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, succeeded in awakening the intelligence of her pupil, who began to comprehend the meaning of words oftentimes repeated, Aylmer serving at first as interpreter; and it was with joy in her heart, yet with eyes dimmed with tears, that the painstaking instructress was rewarded by hearing the gift of speech restored to the young girl; when, after many attempts, the first word she had uttered distinctly for many a long day came full and clear from her lips. And it was one to stir the heart-chords of the faithful woman who loved her; for Mooneea, her arms round her neck, and looking up at her face with a glad smile, slowly yet clearly spoke the one word, the most beautiful word in all our language, the sacred word "mother."

From that day her progress was rapid, and Mrs Loring, proceeding towards the desired end with a rare discretion, with order and prudence, soon had the happiness to see the sweet girl recovered more than one would have thought possible. For before many months were over Mooneea was pretty nearly the same as any other English girl of her own age. Could talk fluently, although at times she had to search her memory for a word to express her meaning. The intellect was clear, and she remembered events that had occurred, but only from the time when her teaching commenced, for of her life before she never spoke, and evidently had no

recollection; and speaking only English, and hearing nothing else, she soon lost entirely all knowledge both of Marathi and Hindustani, and seemed astonished and ignorant of what was said if Aylmer, to test the change that was working so wonderfully, spoke to her in those languages.

Towards Aylmer she bore herself as if she were his sister, and he was a beloved brother, but showed no love of a warmer kind; and although it tried him greatly, no word ever escaped him to show how dear she was, but calmly, patiently he bore the trial, attending to all her wants and caprices, hoping that as time went on, and her budding faculties became more expanded, that the feelings of a woman would be one day awakened, and she would love the one man who, through weal and woe, had remained faithful to her. Such was the position of affairs with Mooneea and her friends, and all seemed bright and promising; but after sunshine comes a storm, and a storm was gathering that was soon to break, and bring terror and dismay in its track.

And it was coming from the East, that quarter of the globe so prolific in storms and troubles —troubles, sometimes, that move even nations, and change the existing order of affairs, causing endless misery and ruin. For at Lucknow all turned out as Santoo had told his father, and two days after the interview with the Thug leader a carriage conveyed both Doctor Westcott and his guest to the railway station, the one bound for Jabalpur, the other for Bombay.

The former soon returned, bearing with him the box, which he had found no difficulty in discovering, following out the directions of the old man, who on his return he found much worse. Consequently no time was lost in verifying the contents, which proved to be as he had said, and taking down the story, repeated again, but this time in the presence of two warders of the prison, who signed their names as witnesses. Armed with these proofs, Westcott impatiently longed for the time to arrive when he could return to England, and bring joy to the heart of his old chief.

It was well no time had been lost, for on the following day after the final confession, Madhajee died, holding within his cold grasp the hand of his faithful son Santoo, who, when the funeral rites had been performed, at once set forth, disguised as an elderly native, under the name of Kurhora, on the track of Mr Cassanetti, to carry out the last commands of his dead father.

He easily found him at Bombay, and boldly went to him, and inquired if he did not want a servant, having previously ascertained in Lucknow, that his present bearer would not leave his country, and was only waiting for his master to engage another in his place to quit his service.

Talking glibly of what he could do, and showing certificates to corroborate his words, although the said certificates did not belong to him, but were borrowed for a consideration from the man whose name he had taken; he took the fancy of Mr Cassanetti, which was further strengthened by the would-be valet informing him in strict confidence that he came from a family of Thugs,

would stick at nothing, if well paid, and had no objection to cross the black water.

This decided the question, and the following day saw Santoo, with a demure countenance, waiting on his new master, who in a month's time was joined by Westcott, and berths were taken in the same cabin in the next steamer for England.

For the last few days before their departure, the Doctor's companion was in a fever of anxiety as to the best plan to follow to carry out his design.

That Westcott had the box with him he knew, for he had seen it, but how to get possession of it was the question.

At last he decided to let events shape themselves, and not to attempt anything until they reached England, and chance served him in this resolve in a friendly way. For observing to his friend one morning that both their trunks were too large to go under their berths on board the ship, he proposed they should buy those of the regulation size, which was done, both being exactly alike in every way, causing Doctor Westcott to remark jokingly that he hoped he would not walk off with the other instead of his own when he landed, as he was afraid his friend's clothes would not fit him.

Nothing occurred on the voyage, and in due time they arrived at Southampton, and the bustle of departure began.

Taking advantage of this, as also the absence of the Doctor on deck to greet some friends, Mr Cassanetti descended to the cabin, where two piles of luggage were awaiting removal.

Substituting his own for the carefully packed trunk of his companion, he summoned his servant, and with the aid of one of the crew transported his belongings to the station, and within an hour's time was on the road to London.

Having nothing to distract his attention, he gave himself up to thought, and that his thoughts were happy ones could be seen by the pleased expression of his countenance.

"Nothing could have been better," mused he. "I have the box. I know the address where I shall find Mooneea, thanks to the worthy Doctor leaving his letters about. I know he will not be in my way for at least five or six days, as he stays near Southampton for a day or two with his relatives, and then, as he informed me, has to go on, after a very short time in town, to Tavistock, to see a friend near there on the moor, undoubtedly the dear General; and when he gets there and tells his story the row will commence, for there is no doubt he will be believed, although he cannot produce the proofs, which I am taking care of for him. There is only one thing, however, as he will find out his loss directly he opens his trunk, he may come straight on to London to find me out, supposing I have taken it by mistake.

"Never mind, I have arranged that. He will have some difficulty in finding me at the address I have given, and I'll lay long odds neither he nor anybody else would find me where I shall put up. I don't think he will waste much time, however, but will go straight on to the General and tell him all about it, and then they will come to London

to find me out, and to look after his dear ward, as he calls her.

"They won't find me or the ward either, for I reckon, with the assistance of old mother Huks and her worthy husband, no trace will be left of her, for I mean this time to work it myself, and not leave it to others. I trusted that old Thug scoundrel, and see what came of it. Here is the girl still alive, and it will cost me a lot of money and trouble to do in London, what could have been so easily done in Gwalior without any risk; but I'll do it this time, never fear."

Pleasant thoughts, indeed, but the traveller seemed to enjoy them, and they lulled him to sleep after a time, and he never awoke until he reached his destination.

Calling a cab, he drove to one of the small foreign hotels in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, and leaving Santoo to look after the arrangements of his room and dinner, he made his way on foot to a dirty looking house in the questionable neighbourhood of Star Street, Old Drury, where ringing, he was admitted by a disreputable gin-drinking looking old woman, whom he saluted by the name of old mother Huks.

The following day, for he felt he must lose no time, he was early astir, and loitering about the neighbourhood of the house where Mooneea dwelt with her friends. And his time and patience were well rewarded, for at three in the afternoon the door opened, and a lady dressed in black quitted the house and walked briskly away. He was not near enough to see her face, but he ascertained from the housemaid, with whom he had established friendly relations,

assisted by a silver key, that she was Mrs Loring the governess, who was going out to tea with some friends, and would not be back until dinner time, and that Miss Mooneea was going to fetch her in the carriage they hired at the livery stables in the next street.

"What a chance!" said he to himself as he walked away, "and it only wants pluck to carry it out. I'll risk it, anyhow."

Some two hours after a carriage drove up to the door. The coachman, being a stout man of a ruddy or rather rubicund countenance, and on being informed that the young lady would not be ready to start for a good twenty minutes, patiently resigned himself to wait, and closing his eyes was soon asleep. He awoke very soon at the sound of a voice addressing him, and looking down from his box, he perceived an elderly looking man with grey hair, and a coachman like himself, as he could see from his dress.

"What do you want?" said he gruffly.

"Nothing," replied the other; "only seeing you asleep, and nearly tumbling off, I thought it a charity to wake you. That's a tidy horse you have there; does he move well?"

"Just you see," said his driver; "get up alongside of me and I'll take you down the street, and as you have done me a good turn, I'll stand a pint at the 'Crown,' for it seems I'm too early for the young missus, and have a good time to wait."

"All right, come along," replied the other, and getting up on the seat they drove away.

On reaching the "Crown" the pair went straight into the bar-parlour, specially kept for privileged

visitors, and discussed the promised pint, a boy picked up in the street minding the horse.

"Let's have another," said the new-comer, and nothing loth the driver of the carriage consented.

"I'll go and fetch it myself, for I want to ask the barmaid if she can't give us a little better stuff than the last," and so saying he quitted the room, speedily returning with two foaming mugs of strong ale. And strong it must have been, or something had been added, for almost immediately after drinking his share his companion fell face forward on the table, and soon loud snoring showed he was fast asleep.

Satisfying himself that this was the case, the other took up his whip, and walking boldly out, said whilst paying the score,—

"Don't wake my old pal; he is a bit boozey, and gone off to sleep. I'll take the carriage round to the stables for him," and mounting the box drove slowly away, arriving just in time to find Mooneea descending the steps.

As the coachmen at the stables were sometimes changed, the servant girl who gave the order where to drive to saw nothing strange, and when the carriage door was fast, they started off at a good pace.

To Mooneea, who did not observe as yet things very closely, and did not know much of London, one street being to her like another, the drive did not seem long. Nor was she astonished when the carriage stopped in front of the miserable looking house in Star Street, which she at once entered on the door being opened by an elderly woman, closely followed by her coachman, who jumped down from his seat directly a dirty

looking man, who appeared to spring out of the ground, advanced to hold the horse.

"Is the cage ready for the pretty bird?" said he on entering the house, the door of which he immediately closed.

"It is," replied the woman in a hoarse voice, "and bar being a bit dark, is very comfortable."

"Quite good enough for the time she will want it," muttered the other, "so put her in and lock her up, and then if she screams no one will hear her."

Mooneea, only half understanding what was said, for strange voices she could not follow, looked in startled surprise from one to the other as if asking what it all meant. She was not long left in doubt, for half pushing, half carrying the girl, the horrible looking old woman at length reached a door on the basement, which gave entrance to a sort of cellar with strongly built walls of brick, and only saved from utter darkness by a gleam of light through a dirty pane of thick glass in the roof.

Too alarmed to cry out, Mooneea was thrust into this noisome den, and the door shut and securely locked.

For a few minutes she uttered no sound, but crouched down on the floor in a tumbled heap. Then suddenly rising to her feet, she went all around the room, feeling the walls and scanty furniture with her hands.

But finding nothing familiar, and all strange, she came to a sudden stop, and uttering in agonised tones, "Where am I? where am I?" fell down on the floor in a dead faint.

"Trapped!" exclaimed the coachman, taking off his hat, and with it the false grey hair and bushy whiskers, revealing the saturnine features of Mr Cassanetti, a look of joy and triumph in his eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

COUNTERPLOT.

After waiting some considerable time past the hour appointed for her charge to call for her in the carriage, Mrs Loring grew first anxious, then alarmed, and a cab being sent for, was speedily on her way to the Longridge Road. On arriving at the house she jumped out and rang the bell furiously, which was answered almost immediately by the housemaid, with a scared look on her face.

"Is Miss Mooneea at home?" asked her mistress eagerly.

The girl looked more astonished than ever as she replied,—

"Why, no, mam; is she not with you? She left in the carriage a good two hours ago to fetch you, and you gave me a rare fright when I heard the bell ring so and found you here. Has anything happened to Miss Mooneea?"

"That I cannot tell, but I fear some accident has occurred; but go at once, Mary, to the

stables, and ask if they have heard anything of the carriage since it left."

The girl soon returned, and from her white, frightened face Mrs Loring saw she had bad news to impart, and her heart almost ceased to beat from anxiety.

"What is it, Mary?" exclaimed she anxiously.

"Oh, mam, something has happened to dear Miss Mooneea, for I saw her into the carriage myself, and she drove away; and now at the stables they are all in dismay, for the man who brought it round here, and whom I barely looked at when I told him to wait, has just been taken there in a drunken condition, and said he met a man who went with him to the 'Crown,' and that they had some beer, but after that he recollects nothing.

"The landlord who brought him home says it is quite true, and that the strange man said he would take the carriage back for his friend. He came here with it, and drove away with Miss Mooneea, and he is up to some mischief. Oh my! oh my! what shall we do?" and the girl's voice broke down, and she commenced to cry bitterly.

"What can it mean?" cried out Mrs Loring in a choking voice. "Mooneea can have no enemy who wishes to do her harm, and yet it is all very strange. What can I do? If only Captain Aylmer were here, instead of on Dartmoor with the General. I must telegraph them at once. But, stay, before I alarm them, I will go to the police; perhaps it is only an accident and I may find her," and after comforting Mary with a few hopeful words she drove straight to the nearest station.

Received courteously by the inspector on duty, she related her story, which was listened to in silence.

After a pause the inspector said,—

"It seems a mystery, as you say the young lady knew no one whose interest it would serve to injure her. I will telegraph at once to Scotland Yard, and put them on the alert, and also ask if anything has been heard of the carriage, as if found without an owner it would be taken there."

"Please do so," said Mrs Loring, "and I will wait for the reply."

The kindly inspector left the room to carry out what he had proposed, and to attend to his other duties, leaving his visitor a prey to anxious suspense.

At the end of about an hour he came back and said,—

"I am afraid, madam, I have not good news to impart. A carriage answering to your description was found on the Embankment, without a driver, and taken to the Yard. Nothing was found inside except a large book, with the name of Loring written on the fly-leaf."

"That is my book. I asked Mooneea to bring it with her. It is true, then, some misfortune has befallen her. Oh, what shall I do?" exclaimed his listener excitedly.

"I should advise you to telegraph at once to the gentlemen you named, and then go home, and if I hear of anything I will let you know," replied the inspector kindly; "and I will also tell them at headquarters to send you a detective to your house, and you must

give him all the details and let him set at once to work, as no time must be lost."

Thanking the polite official, Mrs Loring left the office to act upon his advice, and in a short time a message was received at the cottage on Dartmoor, crying on its inmates to come at once to town as Mooneea was lost.

Five minutes had barely elapsed after her departure when a dark, plainly dressed man, with a clean-shaved face, entered the station and asked to see the inspector.

"I am Sergeant Hobbs of the detective department at the Yard," said he as that official entered, "and I have come to ask if you have heard anything about a man called Clement who was wanted, and whom we have reason to believe is hiding in this neighbourhood?"

"No, I have not," replied the other. "But tell me more about him and I will look after the affair."

This his visitor at once complied with, and gave a long rambling story about the man whose name he had mentioned, then rose to leave, but suddenly turning round he said,—

"As I came in I met a lady leaving your office, looking very anxious and flurried like. Is anything up?"

"Well, it is a strange case, and I am just going to send one of my men to headquarters with a brief account of it, so that they may act at once. But if you would like to hear about it, I will tell you."

"I should; and if you want notice to be sent to the Yard, why I can take it for you, as I am going there straight after I leave here."

"Thank you," replied the inspector, "I shall be very glad, as I can hardly spare one of my men. But I will tell you all I know about this affair, and if I post you up they may put you on the job; and I think it will be a good one, as the lady, Mrs Loring by name, said the friends of the girl who is missing would spare no expense; but this is what she told me," and continuing the inspector related the whole story as far as he knew.

It was listened to in silence, then the visitor rose to go, saying,—

"You need not write anything about it. I fully understand everything. But just give me the names and the address and I will go straight off; and I know I can be put on, and if so I shall give you a part of the reward, as it was you who threw this piece of luck in my way."

"Thank you kindly," replied the other, "I won't refuse it, as I have a large family, and in my position here I don't often finger rewards; but I will write out what you want at once, as I see you are anxious to be off."

This was soon done, and in a few minutes Sergeant Hobbs was driving off as rapidly as possible.

Some three hours after the return of Mrs Loring a loud ring at the bell startled the inmates of the house in the Longridge Road; and the door being opened, a short, plainly dressed man, with bushy red whiskers, presented himself and asked for that lady, saying he was a detective of the name of Jarratt, and sent

to take charge of the business to find out the missing girl.

Conducted at once into the room where the governess had remained ever since she arrived home, a prey to miserable forebodings and despair, she sprang hastily up from her chair and asked eagerly,—

"Has anything been heard of her? Tell me, tell me at once, even if she is dead."

"Not so bad as that I hope, mum; but to tell you the truth, we have found no trace as yet of the young lady, either dead or alive. All I know is that the carriage has been recognised by the owner as the one he hires out to you, but I have only just looked in to see if anything had turned up, I mean if any of you here had heard anything, or could give me any more information."

"Nothing, nothing at all," answered his listener in a choking voice, "and I am half distracted, and don't know what to do," and she commenced to walk hastily up and down the room, taking off at the same time her spectacles to wipe her streaming eyes.

No sooner had she done so than Mr Jarratt, who had, ever since his entrance, been watching her closely, with a puzzled expression, started as if he had been shot, and uttered a cry of surprise.

"What is the matter, Mr Policeman?" said Mrs Loring in startled tones.

"Nothing, mum; only I have the neuralgy badly, being out so much at nights, and I got a sharp twinge all at once, and I suppose I cried out. But I must be going now as I shall

be busy about this affair, and if I hear of anything I will come up at once. Anyhow, as you are anxious, I will look in some time before midnight with the latest news."

"Thank you, thank you," cried Mrs Loring.

With a quiet, stealthy tread the man departed, but on reaching the street the stolid look he had on his countenance during his interview with the lady gave place to one of malicious satisfaction as he muttered to himself,—

"Who would have thought it? The very stars seem to be fighting on my side. To think that after putting the little bird in her cage I had the idea to go up to the house, just to see what was going on, and was rewarded by meeting the governess coming out, bent on some business or other. I follow her, and by fooling that soft-headed inspector, find out all I wanted to know, and to keep the tecs out of the business for a time. Only for a time, though, for they will be up from Dartmoor at six to-morrow evening, and then the search will begin; but I have the start, and know how to use it. How astonished they will be to find both gone. But I must not stay thinking here, but get on to Star Street, and prepare another cage, but for a bigger bird this time, and then it will be my turn, for my hour of vengeance has come at last."

It wanted about twenty minutes to midnight when, according to his promise, Mr Jarratt again rang at the door of the house, and was conducted at once to the room where the governess was anxiously awaiting his arrival.

"Have you found out anything?" exclaimed she excitedly.

"Well, yes, mum, I have. A young girl, foreign looking, was seen this evening entering unwillingly, in company of two women, a house in Star Street, Old Drury. Not a very aristocratic neighbourhood—a doubtful one. But that is not the question. What I have come to say is this. There may be nothing in it, or there may be. I have got two men watching the house, and no one can leave without being shadowed. As the girl seems to answer to the description you gave me, I want you to come along with me and see if it is. I can get you easily into the house, never fear."

"I will go at once," cried Mrs Loring; "please wait five minutes while I put my things on and we will start, and I do trust to heaven that your surmises may prove correct."

"So do I, mum," said the man. "I will wait for you, but don't be longer than you can help, as it is getting late, and I can't afford to waste my time."

The five minutes had barely fled by when Mrs Loring re-entered the room, and a few seconds later the strangely assorted pair were bowling away in a hansom for Star Street. On arrival the door was opened by Mrs Huks, if anything, at this hour of the night, a little more the worse for liquor than in the evening. Not a word was spoken, Mrs Loring following her guide, who led her into a large room, poorly furnished, on the ground floor of the house. Arrived within it, he shut the door and rapidly

locked it, then turning to his companion he said in a mocking voice,—

"Good evening, Mrs Carwithen, I feel honoured by the visit you are paying to my poor abode."

"What do you mean? How do you know my name? Who are you?" exclaimed the governess.

"Don't you know me now, Grace?" said the man, advancing a few paces, taking off the false hair and whiskers he had got on.

"Count Corsi, as I live!" shrieked Grace, retreating to the further end of the room. "Coward, I understand all now. I have tumbled into a trap—a trap laid by you; but why, what do you want?"

A curious smile flitted around the lips of the Count as he replied.—

"This, my dear Grace, just the same that I told you of when last I had the pleasure of seeing you, now more than twelve years ago. What I told you then I tell you again. I love you, and have always done so, and this time you are in my power, and I will force you to hear me and do as I wish. We are not at Morar now, where your husband could follow you. You are dead to him and to the world, and I consider it my duty now to look after you," added he, with a sneer.

Grace Carwithen hardly appeared to know what he was saying, for she was apparently in deep thought.

Suddenly she roused herself, and advancing towards her persecutor, exclaimed in impressive tones,—

"Count Corsi, what have you done with Mooneea?"

"Mooneea, Mooneea, what do you mean?"

"No need to explain; the same head that planned my destruction planned and carried out the same for that poor girl; of that I am certain."

"Well," said the Count laughingly, "they do say history repeats itself. The last time I saw you you accused me of taking off your daughter, and now you say I have done the same for your pupil."

"And so you have, and nothing will ever alter my opinion; but for what purpose I cannot divine."

"A good many things that are dark at present, both in your own and my own life, might be made light if I chose, and they may be one day, but that depends on my good pleasure," said the other sneeringly; "but I won't keep you arguing any more. Here you are, and here you will remain. I have had the room made as comfortable as I could for you, and I will come and see you again soon; so good-night, Grace, and may I find you in a better frame of mind. It will be the worse for you some day if not," muttered he between his teeth as he quitted the room, leaving his wretched victim to pass a sleepless night, a prey to grief and despair.

Great was the astonishment of the General and Aylmer on arriving the next evening, to be informed that not only was Mooneea missing, but that also Mrs Loring, after leaving the house the night before with a detective, had never

returned. They held a hurried consultation, and decided to go at once to Scotland Yard, which they did, and were yet more astonished to find that, save for the brief telegram from the inspector about the carriage, nothing was known about it, nor had any detective been sent to the Longridge Road. Relating all they knew to the officer on duty, who promised to put some men on the job at once, and send one round to them in the morning, they left the office and returned home with heavy hearts, to spend the hours that yet remained of the night in endless discussion, without arriving at any result, for it seemed incredible to both that such a thing could have occurred.

At an early hour the next morning, while yet at breakfast, Mr Gandy, Criminal Investigation Department, was announced, and a shrewd-looking man of middle age entered the room.

"I am very glad to see you," said the General, after cordially greeting the officer, "for I am nearly mad with anxiety, and eager to commence the search at once."

"No time shall be lost, General, if I can help it," replied the detective. "I have got all the information you gave at the office in my head; but may I ask you whether you have any photographs of the ladies?"

"I have of Mooneea, but not of Mrs Loring."

"That's a pity; anyhow, your description of them last night has been printed and sent to all the chief police stations in Great Britain. But now, if you will allow me, I will have the servants up, to see if they can throw any light on what seems a hard nut to crack; but I have

cracked harder," continued Mr Gandy, with a self-satisfied smile.

The cook and housemaid being summoned, were questioned, but the first had no information bearing on the subject to give; though Mary, on being pressed, admitted with some hesitation that, on the afternoon of the disappearance of Mooneea, a strange gentleman had spoken to her as she was shutting the door after Mrs Loring had gone out, had given her five shillings, and asked a lot of questions about the ladies.

"What was he like?" said the detective sharply.

"He was a short, dark man, as far as I can remember, and although he talked English as well as I do, it struck me he was a Frenchman."

"Ha!" cried out her questioner, "that is something. Plenty of young girls often disappear abroad, and are rarely heard of again, I can assure you. But what on earth could the man want with the other, for I feel sure the same party had a hand in both? But we must be going now, gentlemen, as time is precious, and I see I can get no further information here."

The justness of this observation being apparent to all, the party shortly set out on their quest, closely followed by two constables in plain clothes, the trusty assistants of Mr Gandy.

Day followed day and nothing was discovered. All the shipping ports had been closely watched, the foreign police put on the alert, and every suspected house in London, and the other large cities, had been searched, but with no result;

and even the sanguine Mr Gandy began to lose heart.

"It seems," said Ralph Carwithen, at the end of a week of fruitless wandering to and fro, "as if they had been spirited away."

To which Aylmer answered with a groan of despair.

And during all this time the two missing ones had not been far from them. Shut up in separate rooms in the house in Star Street, and waited on only by Mrs Huks, who never spoke in answer to their questioning, were ignorant that they were under the same roof.

As for the Count, he had never been near either since the time of their first arrival, thinking it better policy to wait until the pursuit slackened a bit before carrying out his plan with regard to his captives, and also in the hope that solitary confinement would break, as he said, the proud spirit of Grace Carwithen. But at the end of a week he thought the time had arrived, and telling his servant to follow him, he took him to the house, which as yet he had never entered; and there and then explained the services he expected of him, and for which he would be largely paid. And which were to the effect that he was to employ his talent as a Thug, and strangle a young native girl who had followed him from India, and who annoyed him; and after this to help him to frighten, by the fear of instant death, another woman in the house unless she obeyed his behests.

The native listened in silence, then promised to do what he was told, and after some further

directions from his master, who said he was going out now, but would be back at ten, that he expected to find him in on his return, and ready to do the deed.

Left to himself, Santoo's face took on a puzzled expression as he muttered to himself in Marathi: "A native girl," he said, "that is Mooneea for certain, but who the other is I don't know. But I must save them, for although, of course, I would not harm either dear Mooneea or the other, yet if I do not that man will get someone else to do it, for I see he is determined to put them away. But I must first find out where they are in this great house if I want to save them."

Roaming about all over the place, his search met with no success, for he found every door locked, and he heard no sound to show that any of the rooms were occupied; and he was about giving up in despair, when he suddenly found himself face to face with an old woman who had approached him stealthily.

Old Mrs Huks, for it was that worthy herself, looked him all over, then said in thick tones,—

"Ha! ha! young man, I know who you are. You are the black man the master told me of who was going to do the job to-night. But can you speak English?"

"Yes, mem-sahib," answered Santoo. "Me talk plenty English, me long time servant to sahibs, and for native man talk good."

"That's all right, then, for I don't understand any of your foreign lingo. But come along with me, my old man is out, and won't be back until midnight, so I am all alone, and I like company,

and I'll give you a drop of real good stuff that'll warm the cockles of your heart."

Santoo obeyed, following the old woman into a dirty, evil-smelling room, and the gin bottle was produced and partaken freely of by Mrs Huks, but only sparingly by her visitor, who all the time was racking his brain to find some means to enable the captives to escape.

And he could think of none, for he did not even know in what rooms they were confined, and the only answer he got to his inquiries from his hostess was, "All in good time, young man; when the time comes you will know."

An hour passed away, and it was now past eight o'clock, and he felt he could bear it no longer, but must go and seek help outside, but whom to apply to he knew not; so he rose hastily from his seat, and asked to be let out of the house, as he must go and fetch something for his master he had forgotten.

Mrs Huks eyed him suspiciously for a few minutes, but seeing on the face of the Hindu a stolid look of indifference, led the way to the front door, which she opened with a large key she took from her pocket, telling him not to be too long, as he would be wanted at ten.

On emerging into the street Santoo wandered about aimlessly for some time, for he knew not what to do, and the course of his peregrinations at length brought him into the Strand, which he had hardly entered when, giving a shout of glad surprise and joy, he rushed up to a gentleman he saw approaching and caught him by the hand.

"What do you mean?" said the person thus accosted.

"Don't you know me, doctor-sahib? I am Chunda, that was your orderly in the prison at Lucknow."

"You Chunda!" replied Doctor Westcott, for it was that person himself, who, after spending some days in fruitless search after his trunk, had returned to Southampton, and hearing nothing of it then, had gone on to Dartmoor, only to find the General had left for London, on the errand told him by old Hannah, whose eyes were red with weeping. Returning by the first train, he had not long arrived, and was on his way to the Longridge Road, where they were awaiting his arrival, as he had telegraphed he would be with them at nine.

"You Chunda!" repeated the Doctor incredulously; "it is not possible—he was a young man, and you are not."

"I am disguised, sahib; but there is no time to lose if you want to save Mooneea from being killed to-night. Go at once, or send some one, and fetch her friends, and bring them to the house I will show you, at ten to-night. Do not make any noise at the door, but wait until I open it, then follow me silently, and do what I say, and you will save her and the other one, whom the count-sahib has also got there."

"Count-sahib," said Westcott eagerly, "who do you mean?"

"I mean the sahib that took Mooneea away from Morar, and who calls himself now Cassanetti, and who came with you in the steamer."

"Cassanetti, Count Corsi!" exclaimed the other.

"Follow me now quickly, sahib," said Santoo anxiously, "for the time is short, and then fetch those who can save them."

In a short time they arrived at the house, and after taking a careful look at it so as to know it again, and taking its number and the name of the street, Westcott hailed a passing cab and drove rapidly away.

Left to himself, the Hindu walked up and down before the house for some considerable time, then ringing the bell, was after some considerable delay admitted by the old woman, who could hardly stand, so far gone was she already, and it was plainly apparent to Santoo that another glass or two would render her oblivious of anything.

And it proved to be the case; for talking to her and plying her at the same time with glass after glass of her favourite drink—a bottle of which stood on the table—her anxious visitor soon saw, with a smile of satisfaction, that she was rapidly approaching the last stage of intoxication, which surmise proved correct; for in a very short time her head fell forward on her breast, and the loud, stentorious breathing showed she was insensibly drunk. Putting his hand into her pocket, he drew forth three keys, and as he did so the bell rang, and running hastily to the door, he fitted in the largest, opened the door, and gave admittance to his master.

"Where is old mother Huks?" were his first words.

"Asleep, sahib."

"Drunk, you mean. But have you got the keys?"

"She gave them to me," replied the Hindu, holding them out as he spoke.

"That is right," said his master. "You take this one, and very soon open the door of that room," pointing as he spoke to the place where Mooneea was confined; "go in and do what I told you, then come over to that room, and when I clap my hands twice, you rush in, the door will be open, and you throw your roomal round the neck of the mem-sahib, but not to hurt her, I only want to give her a fright."

Santoo promised obedience, and the Count, opening the door he had indicated, entered the room.

At the noise made by his entrance Grace Carwithen raised her pale face, and said in indignant tones,—

"Why do you persecute me thus? Why not let me die in peace, as I feel I must very soon?"

"Do not talk of dying, sweet Grace," answered the Count mockingly. "You can do better than that, and lead a happy life for the future, if you will do what I have so often asked you. Listen, I have but one desire in life, and that is now within my grasp; but I must use you as an instrument to secure it, and I say to you now you must consent, or beware."

"Beware of what?" said Grace calmly.

"Instead of my love, you will incur my hatred, and that may cost you dear—your life, perhaps—for I am a desperate man, and shrink at nothing to attain my ends.'

"So you threaten, now," replied Grace scornfully; "threaten to kill a weak, defenceless woman. A bold thing to do, but quite worthy of your nature, which I know full well. Would I were a man, to do what my husband did the day you inveigled me to the dâk bungalow at Gwalior."

"And what was that?"

"Shot at you, to kill you as you deserved."

"Well, he is not here now," said the Count laughing, "so I am safe; but now to business, for time is getting on, and I must leave London to-morrow early, and you with me."

"Never!" replied Grace in firm tones.

"That we shall see," said the Count harshly; "but there is yet another thing I must ask you to do, and that is to copy out the words on this paper, and sign it with your full and true name. I have brought what is necessary for the purpose."

"What is it you want me to write?"

"Only this," replied the Count, handing her a folded paper.

Grace took it, glanced at its contents, tore it in half, and flung it on the ground, then said in a voice that betrayed anger, not fear,—

"And did you believe that threats would make me acknowledge, in my own handwriting, to my husband that I was guilty, and deserved at his hands the punishment he, unaware of the truth, inflicted on me; and that I now even declare it is for love of yourself and of my own free will that I leave England with you for ever? You know me not, or you would have scarcely dared to ask me. I would die sooner first than stoop to such dishonour."

"And die you shall," said the Count, clapping his hands twice.

The second sound had barely ceased to echo in the large and scantily furnished room when the door flew open, and in rushed Ralph Carwithen, closely followed by Westcott, Santoo, and the three detectives; and behind them Aylmer, half carrying, half leading Mooneea, who no sooner caught sight of her governess than with a cry of joy rushed into her arms.

"Trapped, but not caught yet," screamed the Count, after he had recovered from his surprise. "The first for you," drawing rapidly as he spoke a revolver from his pocket, and pointing it full at the General, he drew the trigger.

The usually sure aim of the Count missed, however, his mark this time, for passing clear by the head of his would-be victim, the bullet buried itself harmlessly in the wall.

No time was given him for a second attempt, for Santoo darted forward, and like a lightning flash the roomal was round his neck, and he fell to the ground, the pistol dropping from his nerveless hand, and in an instant the detectives were upon him.

As he fell a loud and piercing shriek rang through the room. It came from Mooneea, who, raising her head from the loving arms that held her at the sound of the shot, no sooner saw what took place than she rushed forward, but making only a few paces, uttered that heart-rending cry, and fell face downward on the floor, just as she had done when stricken by the hand of the man who had just now so narrowly escaped with his life.

"Look to her, Westcott," said the General, who had raised her up; "she is either insensible or dead. Go one of you," continued he, turning to the detectives, "and fetch the carriage to take her home." A command at once obeyed.

While the others were vainly trying to recall Mooneea to life, the General and Mr Gandy had a hurried talk at one end of the room, and at its conclusion, turning towards the prisoner, who by this time had been put on his feet, he said,—

"I know you, for Westcott has told me; but what reason have you for perpetrating such villainy, which would no doubt have ended in murder if we had not caught you in time, Count Corsi?"

"You would like to know?" replied the other sneeringly. "Well, I will tell you, and for once I will speak the truth in all I say—in all I say, mark you. It cannot hurt me, for even if I got off out of this affair, which is not likely, I am wanted in many other cities in Europe for various little offences against the laws, so there is no escape, and I don't much care even if they hang me now, for I have had my revenge."

"Revenge on whom?"

"On yourself, my dear General," replied the Count, with a sneer.

"On me! What do you mean?"

"Listen, and I will tell you. First, you say you know me, and so you do as Count Corsi, the lover of your wife, but which I never was; for, think you, I could ever love a proud, passionless woman like that? No, no. What

I did, I did with an object, and I succeeded, for you cast away your wife, and have ever since looked upon yourself as a dishonoured man, a thing terrible for you to bear; and yet she was innocent—innocent in thought, word, or deed—and I lured her to the dâk bungalow that day of the races by saying I could give her news of the child, and so compromised her in your eyes beyond redemption."

"Is that true?" asked Ralph Carwithen, incredulously.

"As I am a living man, I swear it is," replied the Count, holding up his manacled arms.

"Well, it matters little now, for she is dead."

"She is not dead," almost shrieked the Count. "She is alive, and there—there at your side."

"Mrs Loring!" gasped the General.

"Not Mrs Loring," replied a low, sweet voice, "but Grace Carwithen, your wife."

"And I never recognised you."

"No. Men forget, but, women never," said Grace sadly; "but, no doubt, also time and sorrow have altered my looks. I saw you did not, and as I had then no proof of my innocence, I kept silent; but, thank Heaven, now at last my prayers have been answered, and what I said to you that day in the dâk bungalow has come to pass, as I knew it would; for God is good and just, and suffers not the innocent to remain for ever held guilty, however they appear so."

Ralph Carwithen had listened, with head bent down, to what his wife had said, then drawing himself up to his full height, he looked at her fixedly, like a man in a dream;

while his face at first grew crimson, then turned to ashy paleness, but he made no step forward to take her in his arms, to welcome back his suffering, long-lost wife.

On the contrary, he turned away, and pointing towards the Count, said in a harsh voice,—

"Enough; officers, remove your prisoner."

And Grace murmured to herself: "He does not believe me yet, but he will one day," and also turned away to hide her tears.

"Wait one moment, my dear General," said the Count; "just allow me to say a few more words before I say good-bye. You will be interested in them."

"Speak on, then, but briefly."

"I only want to tell you, that it was I that took away your daughter, and bribed an old scoundrel of a Thug to kill her."

"Which he did," said the General excitedly.

"He could not well have done that," said the Count quietly, "as there she is," pointing to Mooneea as he spoke.

"Mooneea my daughter!" cried out the General.

"She is. I know she is," said Grace, raising her hands above her head. "I have often wondered why from the first I loved her with no ordinary love. It was maternal instinct that stirred my heart. And at last is restored to me, as I always said would be, my own darling child," and the speaker threw herself beside the insensible form of the girl and sobbed aloud.

"Mooneea is undoubtedly your daughter Muriel, General," broke in Doctor Westcott. "I have the proofs, the dying deposition of Madhajee Jemadar, who carried her off, and brought her up as his

grand-daughter; and I also had, but they were stolen from me, the dress she wore that day, and a necklace, and a ring I have often seen upon her hand. I did not mention anything of this to you before we got here, as I feared we might arrive too late; and if that had been the case, I intended to have broken the news to you gently, to avoid the dreadful shock it would have been to find your recovered daughter dead."

"I have the box that was stolen from you by that man," said Santoo in his native tongue, and all turned to listen.

"I have the box; and more I can say to show that Mooneea is the little girl that was taken away from Morar; for I, Santoo, the son of Madhajee Jemadar, was with him at the time, and assisted in the affair, and until we started on that fatal march she had never left my father's roof."

"You see, General," broke in the Count mockingly, "the evidence is strong in my favour that what I have said is true. And now to satisfy your curiosity, and to answer the question why I have done all this, and rendered your life now miserable by the thought that you have blighted the life of your wife, and nearly killed your own child. I say, the first from hatred to yourself, and for revenge; but carrying off the child was to benefit myself, for I am Louis Carwithen, your brother, and the next-of-kin according to our father's will."

"You my brother!" said the General, "why he was killed in Italy."

"Not at all; the man that was killed was something like me, and had some things of mine

in his possession that I had lost at play. But I am really and truly your brother, the little nigger brat, as you termed me when we were children together; and as a child I hated you, and determined, young as I was, that when I grew to be a man I would take a terrible revenge for all the slights you put upon me then.

"I have kept my word, and feel no remorse, rather the reverse; but what I do feel, is anger that my final act of revenge and triumph should have been frustrated, and through you, and that, instead of enjoying the hoarded wealth of our father, I shall meet my death inside a prison cell. I have nothing more to say, so *au revoir*, dear brother of mine, until we meet in a better world." And casting a look of the deepest hatred on the assembled group, Louis Carwithen turned and left the room, escorted by his guardians.

CHAPTER XX.

CARWITHEN FARM.

THE sinister farewell of Louis Carwithen was not without significance, for early the next morning the General was informed that Mr Gandy wanted to see him; and on entering that worthy functionary told him that his brother had been found dead in bed, and that he was wanted to identify the body.

"And how he did it," said the detective in a plaintive voice, "is what I can't make out; for we searched him thoroughly before he was put into the cell, and yet the Doctor says he has died from the effects of some virulent poison, one quick in action, for he did not suffer any pain, that I can swear, for he looks for all the world as if he were asleep. Anyhow, he is dead now, and I think if I were in your place, sir, I should not be sorry, for he was a rank bad one, and would have given you trouble yet."

To tell the truth, the elder brother, who had listened in silence to the sad history of the

younger's death, was secretly pleased, for not having seen him since childhood, he had no affection for him, and even if it had been so, the confession he had made as to his dastardly conduct would have extinguished it; but in any case he would have done his duty, and allowed the law to take its course.

And this spared him the pain of appearing in open court as the prosecutor of his own brother. But, above all, what pleased him most was that the family name would not now publicly be dishonoured; as few knew even that such a person existed, and dying before he had appeared before any magistrate, nothing would be known to the world at large of his conduct.

"I am always sorry, Mr Gandy," replied the General, "when I hear of anyone taking his own life, as I consider it the last resource of a coward, if in his proper senses. But I am not astonished, at what evidently you feel deeply, that your prisoner could have secreted poison, and baffled your careful search, as you must remember my brother had lived the best part of his life amongst the natives of India, where poisons are prepared; that even a very small quantity will produce instant death, and defy all the talent of the analyst to detect it; and further, the extraordinary manner in which they will and can secrete about them objects, either large or small, after being subjected to the most rigorous examination, is known to all of us who have been in the country. But I will come with you at once, and do all that is necessary for my unhappy brother; and I think I may rely on you, and all who know of it, to keep the

affair connected with his name as secret as possible."

Which was done. For handsomely rewarding Mr Gandy and his subordinates, who soon were engaged on another job which drove the other out of their heads, Ralph Carwithen, after following the remains of his brother to Kensal Green, had the satisfaction of knowing that his name was not public property.

But he had another and a grave cause for anxiety; for ever since his daughter Muriel had been carried home from Star Street she had lain unconscious, and appeared to be hovering between life and death. It was the evening of the fifth day, and an anxious group was assembled at the bedside. Her father, mother, and Aylmer were there, as also Doctor Ogden, who had been indefatigable in his attention from the first, and by whose skill and direction life had been sustained so far, and Sister Ruth, a trained nurse.

The girl lay, as she had done from the first, in a sort of stupor, with eyes closed, and breathing almost imperceptibly; but the Doctor, after carefully regarding his patient for some time, and noting the pulse and temperature, did not leave the room as he usually did after giving his directions, but turning towards the others, he said in a low voice,—

"There is a change coming, but whether for better or worse it is beyond my power to say. In my opinion, either of two things may happen. The patient will either rouse up out of the condition in which she has been since that dreadful night, only to fall back again into

the same state, accompanied with high fever, delirium at times, denoting great brain disturbance, and nothing, I fear, can save her. Or," continued he, "she may come to herself quietly and slowly, and although somewhat confused at first, will in time regain perfect consciousness, and recognise you all. And not only that, but having lost speech and reason from the effects of the blow she received, just at the time when witnessing the attempted murder of Captain Aylmer, the sight of a similar occurrence, evoking at first some recollection that proved too much for her already somewhat weakened brain, threw her into this state, it may happen that she will wake up with the past forgotten, and be restored to you like the child when stolen from Morar.

"For we know full well that the memories of early days are less easily lost than those of a riper age; for not only is the brain in youth more capable of receiving impressions, but the recollections of that time will pass more frequently across the mind than those of later years. And we also know that injury or great nervous shock may lessen mental activity, or even abolish it, but may be restored by a similar effect, and memory go back to the time when most vivid in childhood. But I cannot say whether this will happen. It is only my opinion, but I sincerely hope it may. But you must all go now. I want the room to be very quiet, and I promise, as I shall stay until the change arrives, to call you directly I see it approaching. So go 'pray and hope.'"

With anxious hearts they obeyed the Doctor's

mandate, and he was left alone with the sick girl and the nurse.

It was approaching midnight when they received a summons to come at once, and Grace led the way, closely followed by Ralph Carwithen and Aylmer.

But not leaning on her husband's arm, for as yet they were estranged, no approach on either side having been made to establish the relation in which they stood to one another; and they seemed to be drifting further apart, much to the astonishment of Aylmer, who could not understand it.

He imagined at first that Grace, smarting under the recollection of the terrible accusation, and the punishment she had endured, innocent as she was, would not accept reconciliation with the man who had inflicted it without his humbling himself and suing for pardon.

But he soon saw he was wrong in this idea, for his early recollections, and the reverence he had always felt for her before her troubles, soon drew him into close companionship with the unhappy woman; and he was not long before he knew that Grace Carwithen was awaiting only a word, only a look from her husband, for the past to be forgotten. He could, however, divine nothing as to the true reason that kept his old chief silent; and could only put it down to the nature of the man, who, proud and passionate to a degree, was ashamed now of himself, yet would not confess it. On entering the room they found the Doctor in a state of suppressed excitement.

"It is coming now, a change is coming, and

God grant it may be favourable," said he impressively.

And he was right, for after moving about restlessly in the bed for a few minutes, Muriel opened her eyes, gazed inquiringly at the group that surrounded her, then with a bright smile illuminating her pale face, said in a feeble voice,—

"Oh, papa and mamma, you both here, and Dicky too. Mury must have been very tired to be put to bed and not know it; but Mury must say her prayers before she goes to sleep," and folding her hands, she repeated the Lord's Prayer from beginning to end. Then half raising herself, she turned towards her parents, and taking a hand of each, she held them clasped within her own, and continued in loving tones,—

"And, please God, bless dear papa and mamma, and make them both so good, and very, very happy. Amen. Now kiss Mury, and say good-night, for she is tired, and wants to go to sleep," and as she spoke her head fell back on the pillow, and the calm and regular breathing showed she was sleeping peacefully.

A deep silence followed for a few seconds, then turning suddenly towards his wife, Ralph Carwithen exclaimed in an appealing tone, "Grace, forgive." He got no further, for with a cry of joy she was in his arms.

From that night Muriel made rapid progress towards recovery, and in a short time the whole family were settled down in the cottage on Dartmoor; much to the delight of old Hannah, and the pure mountain air and loving care soon completed the cure, and

Ralph and Grace Carwithen had the satisfaction of seeing their long-lost child restored to the condition of a healthy, intelligent English girl.

At first she had a little difficulty in following the conversation, particularly if the speakers talked quickly, and sometimes she was at a loss for a word to express her meaning, but never a word of her Indian days, or of Indian speech, ever escaped her lips. All seemed to be forgotten. To all intents and purposes it was as if she had taken up a new existence from the time when she was carried off from her home in Morar.

For she was childlike at first, just like the little Muriel of those days; and she treated Aylmer just as she had done when he was dear Dicky, the playmate of her younger days. But gradually this mood passed away, and the child-woman became pensive, and sought the company of her elders more than she had done, and those around her remarked, although they appeared never to notice it, that often she would look at herself in the glass for a long time, then turning away, would appear to be pondering over as to "how she had gone to bed a little girl and awoke a big one."

To no one was her altered manner more marked than to the man who through all had loved her, and who loved her now even more passionately, although he carefully refrained from showing it.

From at first treating him as a companion, a playmate, and seemingly intensely happy

when he was with her, Muriel commenced to be shy and reserved when he was present, and when he addressed her, blushed and stammered in reply; and if he attempted to caress her, as he was at first accustomed to do, drew hastily back, as if afraid. This, however, gave Aylmer no pain; rather were these acts welcomed with delight, for he saw, as her father and mother also saw, that like a butterfly emerging from its gloomy covering into bright life, the child was transformed into a woman; replete with a woman's instincts and feeling, and with a heart already stirred with thoughts of love.

Her eighteenth birthday was now rapidly approaching, and thanks to the judicious teaching of her father and mother, she appeared to comprehend the position, and the cares and duties of the life she must then lead when in possession of so much wealth.

But when asked as to what she would do with it, a happy smile lighting up her face, she always replied,—

"Stay where I am, for I am here so very, very happy."

And Aylmer was happy too. For slowly, but surely, he drew nearer and nearer towards his heart's desire, and soon had the joy of knowing that the child he had loved, the girl he had loved, and now a woman, was his own for ever.

It came about simply.

Walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, as they so often did, remarking a more than usual reticence on the part of Muriel, who appeared to be pondering over something she did

not quite understand, Aylmer said suddenly taking her two hands within his own, and looking her full in the face,—

"Muriel, dear, what is it you are thinking of?"

"I do not know," answered the girl, after a slight pause, in a plaintive voice. "I cannot understand myself, for in my head has passed such lots of strange things—things or thoughts that I cannot explain, as all seemed confused; but lately they have gone, and their place been taken by another feeling, one of contentment and happiness, and I feel it more when you are with me and we are alone. Then, then, I am happy, and everything around me changes its look The sun seems brighter, and the flowers are gayer, the very air is full of peace, and I feel within me as if I were listening to delicious music, and I could cry with joy. What is it that causes this? This feeling of happiness, which now, even as I speak, is so full within me that I would wish to close my eyes to sleep, and remain so for ever—tell me what it is?"

"You love me, Muriel, darling, as I love you," replied Aylmer in passionate tones.

"Yes, yes, that is what I feel," said the young girl after a pause, during which she appeared to be thinking.

"I love my father, and I love my mother, but with them I do not feel the same as when you are near me, neither does my heart beat as it does when you touch my hand. I love you, I love you," and flinging herself into the outstretched arms of her companion, she hid her face on his breast; then raising herself, lip met

lip, and a long, clinging kiss put the seal to their betrothal.

The morning of the eighteenth birthday of Muriel Carwithen was ushered in by bright sunshine, as if all the world rejoiced. Everyone in the cottage was early astir, and soon after breakfast lawyer Lidgett was announced.

This was, however, not his first visit to his friends; and lately he had been a frequent visitor, holding long conversations with Muriel and Aylmer, on business he said, as the young lady had appointed him her lawyer, to arrange matters with the trustees of her property when she arrived at the majority, as fixed by the terms of her grandfather's will. In all these talks Ralph Carwithen took no part, for he still felt the loss of what should have been his own, and more deeply the loss of the home of his ancestors, and could scarcely bear to hear any reference to the subject.

Besides, he felt that Aylmer was now her proper counsellor, and he knew that with Lidgett she was in safe hands.

"Papa, dear," said Muriel soon after the lawyer's arrival, "I want you to do something to-day to please me. You know it is my birthday, and you cannot refuse me anything I ask."

"Nor can I, dear child," replied her father fondly; "but what is it you want?"

"To take me to Carwithen Farm, the house in which you were born, and where my ancestors lived and died, for I have never been inside it yet."

"Impossible, my dear; I could not go," said Ralph Carwithen huskily. "You know, although

from my humble cottage here I can see the ancient home of my family, now in other hands, I have never crossed its threshold, nor even entered the lodge gates, for I could not bear to see other people not of our name or race in possession of what should have been my own."

"No fear of that, General," broke in the lawyer; "you can come, as little missy asks, for you will see no strangers. I know that, for I am agent for the property; besides, you can't refuse her anything on her birthday, and that you know."

After a little hesitation Ralph Carwithen consented, and soon the whole party, including old Hannah, who begged earnestly to accompany them, were driving up the stately avenue that led to the house, whose large door stood open wide to receive them.

No sooner were they assembled in the grand old hall, so full of associations to one member of the party at least, when the old lawyer turned to Ralph Carwithen, and taking him by the hand, said in a voice that trembled with emotion,—

"Welcome home, Master Ralph, welcome home."

"What do you mean?" said his hearer excitedly.

"I mean," replied the other, "that Carwithen Farm, with all its belongings, is yours to-day, as it was your father's in his time; and further, that since his death no stranger has ever dwelt under its roof. I took care of that."

"But how, who has done all this?"

"Your daughter."

"My daughter; but how could she do it?"

"That is easily answered," replied the lawyer. "You know, dear Master Ralph, I have always loved you as if you were my own son, for, having remained an old bachelor, I have no children of my own; and I always intended that all I possessed should be yours when I passed away, and having saved a little money, with that, and by borrowing the rest, I bought the estate, house, lands, and all appertaining to the family, I was taught by my father to revere, when it was sold under the terms of that most iniquitous will.

"From that day to this it has been mine; but not a living soul was aware of the fact, as I only gave out I was the agent to the property, and being an oldish man even then, I left it to you on my death, for I knew full well that your proud nature would not accept it as a gift, even from one who has been a devoted servant to your family all his life.

"But I have lived longer than I expected," continued the old man, with a low laugh, "and right glad I am, for I have seen to-day what I never hoped to see myself — my dear Master Ralph in the home of his ancestors, and through one of his own family; for the first act of little missy this morning, when she came into her property, was to sign a cheque for the purchase money, and it passed out of my hands into hers."

"And I now give it to you, dear papa, on my birthday, as a present from your little daughter, with her fondest love," quietly said Muriel, holding out two large pieces of parchment as she spoke.

"Take them, take them, Master Ralph," cried out the old lawyer. "They are all right, for I drew them up myself. One transfers Carwithen Farm, with all its dependencies, to your daughter by sale. The other is a deed of gift executed by herself in favour of her father, General Ralph Carwithen, who now is the undisputed owner of the home of his family, and long may he live to enjoy it, say I," and the speaker turned away to hide the tears he could not restrain.

Ralph Carwithen stood looking at his daughter for a time as like one in a dream, then taking her in his arms, he kissed her fondly, and said in a voice broken with emotion,—

"And from you, my darling Muriel, I take it with heartfelt thanks, with a feeling of joy and gratitude that I cannot express, for little did I ever think I should have restored to me all that I hold most sacred on earth, and now rendered doubly precious to me as the loving gift of my beloved child. 'Lost through hate, regained by love,' the house of Carwithen will now stand firmer and prouder than ever in the country that has known them so long; and its annals can boast of no nobler page than the thoughtful and affectionate act of its only daughter. And to you, my dear old friend," continued he, turning towards the lawyer and grasping his hand. "my warmest thanks are due, for if you had not done what you did at the time of my father's death, all would have been lost for ever. And now—"

"A true mon Carwithen have a comed to hes own agen," broke in old Hannah, the tears streaming down her withered face.

"Yes, that's just it," said lawyer Lidgett, "and quite meets the case, and I am amply rewarded by knowing that it is so, and need no thanks. So come along, now, Master Ralph, and make a round of the house and grounds, which I think you will say are very little altered since you were a boy."

Three months after the wedding of Aylmer and Muriel took place, and all the countryside flocked to Tavistock to witness it. And if ever a bride went to the altar with heartfelt wishes for her happiness, it was the young girl whose past days had been so miserable, but who could now look forward to a bright future.

The guests had all departed, and husband and wife were left alone.

"Grace," said Ralph Carwithen, "I ought to be happy now; yet I cannot be completely so, for I can never forget the past, and the misery I brought on both wife and child. Rendered cold, stubborn, and proud by the treatment I received from my father in my boyhood, I revenged it on my brother. I feel now, all that has occurred has been in a great measure the result of my conduct towards him; who, perhaps, under better and kinder influences, might have been a good instead of a bad man, and never plotted either against you or our dear child, innocent in every way as you both were."

"For Muriel you need have no fear," she replied. "Her marriage opens up a happy new life full of the fairest promise."

"Not a new life only, Grace, but life itself, her own; of which as yet she knows nothing. As Mooneea she led another's, and no remembrance of

that exists; whereas the last few years are to her as nought. For life is not life, when the faculties of the mind are seriously impaired; it is mere existence, nothing more. No, I have no fears for her. *My* cruel punishment is the memory of my conduct to *you*, of the unmerited suffering I inflicted on you."

"Forget the bitter past and its errors, dear husband. Think only of the happiness that now awaits us also," was the answer he received.

THE END.